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# #BreakFree: Race, WGN America's *Underground*, and the Changing Landscape of Audience Reception

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# #BreakFree: Race, WGN America's *Underground,* and the Changing Landscape of Audience Reception

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# Abstract

## #BreakFree: Race, WGN America's *Underground,* and the Changing Landscape of Audience Reception

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Premiering in March of 2016 on WGN America, *Underground* became the first regular, primetime television series about American slavery. A certified hit for a station in the midst of rebranding itself, *Underground* became the network's second most watched series. During its first season, viewership in the 18-49 demographic rose by 900%. Bridging research on both the cultural phenomenon of "Black Twitter" and scholarship on the politics of Black audience reception, this project seeks to understand Black viewership in the era of media convergence. Using critical technocultural discourse analysis, I examine how Black adoption of Twitter for intragroup discourse illustrates the myriad ways Black viewers negotiate, celebrate, and contest representations of Blackness in contemporary television. Considering the affordances of the micro-blogging platform, this project examines Black viewers' use of hashtags and media like emojis and GIFs. I analyze how these media forms are used to signify both a minoritized subject positioning and viewers' affective response to the series. Additionally, I analyze how those affiliated with the show – cast, creators, writers, and

producers – used Twitter as an intermediary to structure audience reception, and I position their tweets as paratexts worthy of critical consideration. As social media platforms further collapse the distance between viewers and industrial agents, this thesis considers the shifting relationships between audience, text, industry, and platform.

## Table of Contents

## List of Illustrations

# CHAPTER ONE: Black Reception and Black Twitter

Heralded as one of television's greatest "success stories," the mini series *Roots* (ABC, 1977) reached 51.1 percent of American households watching television on the night of its finale.[1] In the current era of segmented audiences and more content and distribution platforms than ever, not even large scale television events like The Superbowl can capture an equivalent share of American television viewers.[2] Despite the record-breaking success of *Roots*, representations of slavery have largely been relegated to narrative and documentary filmmaking. In 2015 and 2016, however, narrativized depictions of American chattel slavery returned to television with the premieres of *The Book of Negroes* (BET, 2015), a remake of *Roots* (History, 2016), and WGN America's *Underground* (2016-2017), which became the first and only regular primetime television series about slavery. In his review of the WGN America series, Joshua A. Alston, critic at *The A.V. Club*, stated "slave narratives often feel like punishment… that put WGN's America's *Underground* in a precarious position of asking viewers to pay weekly visits to a period many would soon rather avoid entirely."[3] Despite the precarious position Alston outlines in his review of the series' first season, *Underground* was able to navigate the tumultuous terrain of representing an extended slave narrative, and quite successfully.

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[1] Josef Adalian, "Roots is Still One of the Biggest TV Success Stories Ever," *Vulture*, May 26, 2016, http://www.vulture.com/2016/05/roots-miniseries-ratings-were-off-the-charts.html

[2] Ibid.

[3] Joshua Alston, "WGN America's Underground is a Taut Thriller Disguised as a History Lesson," *The A.V. Club*, https://tv.avclub.com/wgn-america-s-underground-is-a-taut-thriller-disguised-1798186867

Premiering in March of 2016, *Underground* was WGN America's latest entry into the world of "prestige" cable dramas. *Underground* became the network's second most watched series, and during its first season WGN America's viewership in the 18-49 demographic rose by 900%.[4] Despite the program's success and material evidence of WGN America gaining ground in the landscape of prestige cable dramas, *Underground* was cancelled after two successful seasons when WGN America was acquired by Sinclair Media.[5] The series, however, did not disappear quietly from the new network. In September of 2017, John Legend, one of the series' executive producers, took to Twitter to release a statement on the cancellation and started the hashtag #SaveUnderground. His decision to release his statement on the platform and include a hashtag for viewers was strategic. Legend was mobilizing a very dedicated audience who had been building a community on Twitter around this show for over a year and urging them to deploy their social media savvy in a networked effort to fight the show's cancellation.

*Underground's* cancellation and the subsequent social media pushback did not occur in a vacuum; in fact, *Underground's* cancellation came at the same time as news that a slate of Black cast programs were coming off the air.[6] While some critics had tentatively labeled 2016 as the beginning of the "Golden Age of Black TV,"[7] one year later it looked like this era was already waning. In fact, Black viewers utilized the

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[4] Christine Becker, "WGN America: From Chicago to Cable's Very Own," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels,* ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 103.
[5] Ibid, 103.
[6] This Includes *Pitch* (2016), *Survivor's Remorse* (2014-2017), and *The Carmichael Show* (2015-2017).
[7] Dave Schilling, "Is This the Golden Age for Black TV Makers or Another False Dawn," *The Guardian,* September 21, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/sep/21/golden-age-black-tv-false-dawn-david-simon

affordances of Twitter to create a space for collective "mourning" and to discuss the precarious reality of Black televisual representation.[8] This began when Matthew A. Cherry, a Black independent filmmaker, tweeted "In Memoriam of some of the TV series with black leads we lost in 2017" and included photos of twelve canceled series the first of which was *Underground*.[9] Though the campaign to save *Underground* ultimately failed, the issues Legend detailed in his statement and the community whose engagement with the series he hoped to capitalize on illustrate pertinent themes about the precarity of Black television and how Black audiences respond to television via digital platforms.

The creative team behind *Underground* sought to contemporize the narrative, most clearly through music, and make it clear to viewers that the white supremacist structures the show's protagonists were rebelling against had morphed in form, but were still active and affecting minoritized populations today. In the case of *Underground,* Twitter became a space for the cast, producers, and creators to make their attempts to contemporize *Underground* and to create links between present day forms of oppression visible to the audience, from promotion before the premiere to the series' cancellation. Situating *Underground* in the context of the horrific events in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017[10] and the recent uptick in racist rhetoric and policies targeting undocumented

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[8] Jacqueline Johnson, "In Memoriam: Black Twitter and TV Cancellations,"*Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture*, July 2, 2018, https://www.flowjournal.org/2018/07/black-twitter-and-tv-cancellations/

[9] Matthew A. Cherry, Twitter, December 27, 2017, https://twitter.com/MatthewACherry/status/946077320149741568https://twitter.com/MatthewACherry/status/946077320149741568

[10] Joe Heim, "Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death," *The Washington Post,* August 14, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm_term=.4ca755a776b1

immigrants, Legend illustrated the creators' and producers' attempts to link the narrative to current issues facing marginalized groups. Legend begins by writing,

> In the wake of the events in Charlottesville, America has had a conversation about history and memory, monuments and flags, slavery and freedom. We've had a debate about the Civil War and how we remember the Confederate leaders who provoked the War in order to perpetuate the evil institution of slavery. How do we tell the stories of this era? Who is celebrated? Who is ignored? […] As storytellers, producers and creators of content for film and television, we have the power to take control of the narrative.

The themes present in Legend's statement were present in the series' promotional materials and the text of the show itself.

In addition to being a platform that structures reception and audiences' meaning-making processes, Twitter functions as a site where networks can leverage viewer investment into promotional labor and as a tool to promote liveness as audiences have shifted to new forms of viewing.[11] *Underground's* subject matter and its explicit positioning as a series about "resistance" were also tied to the shows framing on Twitter. In addition to #UndergroundWGN, #breakfree and #riseup were developed by the creative team behind the series to characterize the show on social media and to facilitate group discussion. I posit that with his statement attempting to fight the show's

[11] Eleanor Patterson, "Must Tweet TV: ABC's TGIT and the Cultural Work of Programming Social Television," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 26 (2018); Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized,* 2nd Edition, (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

cancellation, Legend wanted to tap into this ethos of resistance that the show had been curating. Though not framed as such, Legend also used raced concerns to generate a form of fan labor. Rebecca Wanzo's assertion that "African-Americans make hypervisible the ways in which fandom is expected or demanded from some disadvantaged groups as a show of economic force or ideological combat," helps frame both Legend's call for fans to #SaveUnderground and how the series attempted to entice viewers during its promotional rollout.[12]

As Beretta Smith-Shomade discusses in her introduction to *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*, though Black audiences watch television in larger proportions than their white counterparts, their viewing habits have been largely understudied, especially for programs speaking to Black audiences specifically.[13] Both Smith-Shomade and Wanzo were intervening in bodies of scholarship that had largely overlooked Black viewers and fans as a group worthy of analysis. This project extends the work of these scholars and others including Jacqueline Bobo and Robin R. Means Coleman to address how Black viewership has shifted in a time of media convergence, which is defined by Henry Jenkins as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation of multiple media industries, and the

[12] Rebecca Wanzo, "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 20, (2015): 2.1.
[13] Beretta Smith-Shomade, *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 2.

migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted."[14]

This project is concerned with examining how Black adoption of the micro-blogging platform Twitter for intragroup discourse illustrates the myriad ways Black viewers negotiate, celebrate, and contest representations of Blackness in contemporary television, and further, how the affordances and limitations of Twitter as a platform structures in-group discussions about race. I examine Black audience reception of *Underground* through what Dayna Chatman identifies as a "politics of viewing." Dayna Chatman's research eschews limiting binaries, and is centrally concerned with making the intricacies of Black audience reception legible. In her work she defines a politics of viewing as,

> a discursive struggle whereby individuals engage in a "critical politics" in which representations are not simply judged on the basis of "positive" or "negative" stereotypes, but instead are interrogated in ways that illustrate their simultaneous grappling with the pleasures of media consumption, concerns over potential influences of representations, and whether television producers and networks or viewers themselves should be accountable for representation deemed detrimental to out-group perceptions of Black Americans.[15]

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[14] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).
[15] Dayna Chatman, "Black Twitter and the Politics of Viewing Scandal" in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World,* 2nd edition, ed. Jonathan Gray, C. Lee Harrington, and Cornel Sandvoss, (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 300.

Here, Chatman illustrates that the individuals whose tweets she uses for her research pushed their analysis of Black media representations past whether or not they reinforced positive or negative stereotypes. Instead, Chatman dissects the layered meaning and critical negotiations embedded in tweets from Black viewers, an approach I emulate in this study of *Underground* viewers. In addition to addressing how Black viewers of *Underground* received the show and discussed it with a community of other viewers, I am interested in examining how those affiliated with the show used the platform to structure reception.

Premiering at the end of the Obama presidency, when the pervasiveness of white supremacist ideology was becoming more overt and visible, *Underground* inserted itself into debates about the politics of history and memory. Returning to John Legend's statement about the important cultural work of *Underground*, he asks, "do we give hallowed public space to those who fought to tear the country apart so that millions could remain in shackles? Or do we celebrate those who risked their life in the pursuit of freedom and equality?"[16] Because of television's role in the production of national narratives and the fraught history of slavery's representation, *Underground* and its community of Black viewers are worth analyzing in depth. While scholars like Chatman have done important work addressing the particularities of Black viewership in the time of media convergence, this project attempts to extend this line of research, which has primarily focused on primetime melodramas in ABC's TGIT programming block, by focusing on a cable "prestige" period drama distinctly addressing the oppression of Black

[16] John Legend, Twitter, September 27, 2017, https://twitter.com/johnlegend/status/913041063740366849.

people. *Underground's* subject matter is markedly different than that of *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018) or *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-); I am interested in what differences and similarities in practices in the viewing community on Twitter can tell us about Black audience reception and its relationship with Twitter as a platform. With this project, I attempt to address a gap in the literature about Black audience reception while simultaneously contributing to emerging lines of inquiry about the relationship between social media platforms and television and Black audiences in the digital space.

## FROM *ROOTS* TO *UNDERGROUND*: TELEVISING SLAVERY

WGN America's *Underground* follows a group of slaves on The Macon Plantation in Georgia in 1857. Early reviews of the series echoed the sentiments put forth by the creators and cast in early promotional materials, *Underground* was slavery like you had never seen it before. Critics like Vann R. Newkirk and Joshua Alston likened it to thrilling capers like *Prison Break* (FOX, 2005-2007, 2017) or adventure narratives like *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-).[17] Seven slaves on The Macon Plantation who labor in both the house and cotton fields plan and execute a dangerous escape north on a journey of over 600 miles. The early episodes of the series (all of The Macon Seven do not make it off of the plantation until the fourth episode) set up the dynamics of The Macon Plantation and illustrate the routine brutality of life for the enslaved.

Viewers are introduced to Noah (Aldis Hodge) early on as a man with a plan. As he states in the second episode to the group of runners he has corralled, "I've been a slave

[17] Vann R. Newkirk II, "Underground: A Thrilling Quest Story About Slavery," *The Atlantic,* May 11, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/underground-wgn-america-review/482262/; Alston, "Underground Review".

all my life, waiting to die, to live, or for a miracle. I'm done waiting." [18] He and the six others who follow, Rosalee (Jurnee Smollett-Bell) a house slave whose mother has worked to shield her from some of the horrors of plantation life, fiery teenager Henry (Renwick Scott) who has found kinship with Noah, Cato (Alano Miller) a field slave promoted to overseer whose motivations are never clear to the audience or his co-conspirators, Zeke (Theodus Crane) who is left alone in mourning after his wife commits infanticide and is subsequently sold to another plantation, Moses (Mykelti Williamson) the plantation's preacher, and lastly, Boo (Darielle Dorsey) a six-year old girl whose parents, Moses and Pearly Mae (Adina Porter), make extreme sacrifices to make sure she can escape enslavement. While The Macon 7 enact their harrowing escape plan, which of course breaks down at several points, the series returns to The Macon Plantation to illustrate to audiences the effects the group's escape has wrought on all of the slaves who have been left behind. Though *Underground* is certainly distinct from the outset being the only series to make The Underground Railroad and slave resistance the central focus, the series is also set apart from other representations of slavery on-screen by its commitment to illustrating the nuances of life for enslaved people at different ages and with different amounts of autonomy (of course limited). Most importantly, *Underground* is committed to illustrating the ways women were instrumental to slave resistance efforts, with characters Rosalee, her mother Ernestine (Amirah Vann), and Pearly Mae each using the tools at their disposal to exert agency where they can.

[18] Misha Green and Joe Pokaski, "War Chest," *Underground,* WGN America, March 16, 2016.

In her survey of representations of slavery in American film and television, historian Brenda E. Stevenson identifies four thematic and temporal waves of slavery's representation – Early Hollywood Deciphers Slavery in the Public Imagination, Hollywood's Golden Age: Memorializing the Plantation and The Lost Cause on Screen, Slavery, Film, and The Long Civil Rights Era, and finally *Roots* and Revolutionizing the Filmed Slave Experience in the Late Twentieth-Century and Beyond.[19] In her work, Stevenson outlines the relationship between slavery and the entertainment industry, and illustrates how representation of the enslaved shifted over time in concordance with social change and new forms of historiography.[20] It is the fourth section of Stevenson's analysis, where she traces a direct lineage from Roots to *Underground* that I am most interested in parsing. Crediting *Roots's* commitment to slave resistance to both the gains of The Civil Rights Movement, as well as the rise of "social history that identified the personal and group power among the politically, economically, and socially marginalized," Stevenson illustrates how *Roots* was the first television program to illustrate the slave experience through the perspectives of the "black men, women, and children who grew up, lived, and died as slaves."[21] Further, Stevenson briefly notes how African-American viewers received the series, especially appreciating the characters' resourcefulness, talent, and desire for freedom and agency.[22] Focusing primarily on dominant themes through textual analysis, Stevenson spends little time discussing the

[19] Brenda E. Stevenson, "Filming Black Voices and Stories: Slavery on America's Screens," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 3, (2018): 488-520.
[20] Ibid, 489.
[21] Ibid, 503.
[22] Ibid, 504.

audiences for the films and television series she examines in her research. However, her assertions about the thematic overlap in series and films about slavery that *Roots* made space for is helpful in framing the lineage *Underground* is a part of. Most resonant in my analysis of *Underground,* is her assertion that both *Roots* and *Underground* committed to demonstrating the contours of slave life for Black women, and moreover, didn't construct these women as docile and subservient, but as active agents committed to resistance. While Stevenson argues that not every film produced between *Roots* and *Underground* was interested in enslaved women, using films like Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) as an example, she states that *Underground's* "stories and action sequences are more focused on females, regardless of age and status, all actively resist their enslavement, and are the equals, if not superior, to men in liberation work renders this series not only unique, but essential to the viewing audience's understanding of slave life." [23] Stevenson's research presents an important survey of narrativized depictions of American chattel slavery, but in her work she flattens the specificities of film and television as mediums, even stating that *Underground* is an important contribution to slavery's filmography. [24]

In addition to the series format providing more time to inject nuance into the narrative, *Underground*'*s* place on cable in primetime is significant to the way the narrative arcs were structured and how the audience coalesced around the series. In her analysis of *Scandal* and the series' highly active and engaged Twitter fans, Elizabeth

[23] Ibid, 513
[24] Ibid, 513

Affuso sketches out how the very structure of *Scandal* lent itself to live-tweeting, stating that *Scandal* uses a combination of "soap opera techniques and social media strategies to inscribe notions of liveness into the program for viewers." [25] Similarly, *Underground* blends techniques from multiple genres including soap opera, action/adventure, and the heist thriller to entice viewers to watch the series live and to discuss their reactions with other viewers. Deploying narrative twists and several cliffhangers during episode breaks and conclusions, the writers of *Underground,* similarly to *Scandal*, "[mutate] the nighttime soap opera to accommodate new cultures of liveness," which as a genre, Affuso argues, is "uniquely well situated to present day televisual spoiler culture."[26] From my own experience as a viewer who live-tweeted each episode of the show's inaugural season, it was paramount to participate live, so that I could experience each twist without being primed ahead of time.

As I will continue to argue throughout this project, however, *Underground*'s subject material meant that the practices of the viewing community were unique. Locating the primary narrative force of *Scandal* within the tumultuous romantic relationship between Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) and President Fitzgerald Grant (Tony Goldwyn), Affuso asserts that the romantic plot at the center of the narrative also drives much of the online conversation, and further helped catapult *Scandal* into a verifiable hit. [27] While viewers, mostly women, expressed a deep investment in the

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[25] Elizabeth Affuso. "#WhoShotFitz: Genre, Social Media, and the Reinscription of Liveness on *Scandal"* (presentation, Console-ing Passions, Leicester, UK, June 2013).
[26] Ibid, 3.
[27] Ibid, 4.

primary romantic pairing in *Underground* (discussed at length in chapter 2), the genre conventions that contributed to the series' compatibility to Twitter came from the series' reliance on heist and action/adventure tropes in addition to soap tactics, and the severity of the subject material. Many of the cliffhangers to which viewers responded the most involved the very real dangers of attempting to escape enslavement, but were of course edited to accommodate the structure of a traditional hour long cable drama and to keep audiences on the edge of their seats. *Underground* took the harrowing experiences of enslaved persons and edited them into cliffhangers and jaw dropping tweetable moments without downplaying the severity of the characters' situations. For example, at the end of episode three, "The Lord's Day," Rosalee and Noah are forced to abandon their carefully thought-out plan of escape and make a hasty exit after Rosalee believes she has killed plantation overseer Bill Meeks (PJ Marshall) in a struggle after he attempted to sexually assault her. The episode ends with her and Noah fleeing before schedule (the group had initially planned to leave Saturday night because their cabins are not checked on Sundays as everyone is at church) and leaving behind seven members of their escape group. The episode is carefully crafted to illustrate the complex set of social relations on The Macon Plantation. Before Bill attacks Rosalee, we see him drunk and rambling about his late wife. He states that his wife never owned anything as nice as the dress Rosalee and the rest of the house slaves are forced to wear. Responding violently to Rosalee's perceived transgression in wearing more expensive clothes than his late white wife, Bill attacks Rosalee and attempts to sexually assault her. At several points throughout the first season, the writers depict sexual violence against enslaved persons and demonstrate its

prevalence. However, this scene and the following escape that concludes the episode illustrate how the writers scripted and edited the real horrors of slavery to fit genre conventions. To return to Stevenson's survey of on-screen depictions of slavery, *Underground* represents an advancement in depictions of enslavement and a critical intervention; however, understanding the series as television and viewing it through its genre hybridity illustrate the unique ways the series was compatible with live-tweeting.

## #RepSweats: The Politics of Black Audience Reception

In Raoul Peck's Academy Award nominated documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), James Baldwin addresses differences in reception by Black and white audiences.[28] When Black audiences saw Sidney Poitier jump off of the train because he refused to leave his white companion in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), Baldwin asserts, they were furious and thought Poitier's character was a fool for throwing his freedom away. He notes that white audiences received that scene much differently. For them, Poitier's Black sacrifice and the redemption he grants to his racist white companion, John "Joker" Jackson (Tony Curtis), provided white spectators with absolution from one of the most recognizable Black figures in America. One of America's sharpest critics and public intellectuals, Baldwin addresses a theme embedded throughout the literature on race and reception practices: Black viewership is political.[29]

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[28] *I Am Not Your Negro,* directed by Raoul Peck (2017; Magnolia Pictures/ Amazon Studios).
[29] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* (South End Press: Boston, 1992); Robin R. Means Coleman, *Say It Loud: African American Audiences, Media, and Identity,* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Wanzo, "African American acafandom".

Because of a history of negative representation on screen, in print, and on stage, Black audiences have had to carefully police their on-screen representation.[30] The scholarship I address here, Jacqueline Bobo's analysis of reception of Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985) and Nancy C. Cornwell and Mark P. Orbe analysis of differing reception of the comic strip *The Boondocks* (1999-2006), are careful to note, however, that Black viewers are not monolithic. Both *The Color Purple* and *The Boondocks* became controversial texts within the Black American community, and viewers were split on whether or not they should support the film or the comic strip, and later series. While some may celebrate seeing their stories told on screen, others have concerns about what messages specific depictions send about Blackness; in fact, this can be from the same group of viewers. Finally, these differences in reception can sit along gendered and classed lines.

After the release of Steven Spielberg's 1995 film *The Color Purple,* based on Alice Walker's novel of the same name, Black audiences were divided across gender lines in their reception of the film. Bobo surveyed reviews of the film written by both male and female Black critics and conducted in-depth interviews with Black women, many of whom enjoyed the film in contrast to many Black male detractors. To illustrate the myriad criticisms some Black men had of the film and the novel and Walker herself, she cites Courtland Milloy, a Black columnist at *The Washington Post*, who stated that the book was demeaning and " [he] got tired, a long time ago, of white men publishing

[30] Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Wanzo, "African American acafandom".

books by Black women about how screwed up Black men are."[31] While Black male critics in the popular press were frustrated by seemingly yet another depiction of them as violent brutes, the women Bobo interviewed assessed both the novel and the film very differently. Bobo notes that many Black male viewers were unnerved at the fact that the film portrayed issues that were supposed to remain private within the Black community.[32] In her research Bobo stresses that audiences use "interpretive strategies that are based upon past viewing experiences as well as upon their personal histories, whether social, racial, sexual, or economic."[33] Despite differences in medium, Nancy C. Cornwell and Mark P. Orbe also articulate Bobo's conclusions.

In their analysis of online discussion forums about the comic strip, and later television series, *The Boondocks,* Cornwell and Orbe noted that African-Americans were split about whether or not *The Boondocks* was helping or harming their communities, stating, "the impact of [the] representation of racial stereotyping was one of the most frequent themes appearing in the website posting during the period of study…it was also the most divisive."[34] Like the Black men who negatively reviewed *The Color Purple*, many Black readers were dismayed that topics that were supposed to remain within "the community," like homophobia and colorism, were now visible to a broad audience, including white readers.

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[31] Jacqueline Bobo "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Say It Loud! African-American Audiences, Media, and Identity,* ed. Robin R. Mean Coleman, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 206.
[32] Bobo, *Cultural Readers*.
[33] Ibid. 87.
[34] Cornwell and Orbe, "Keepin' It Real," 34.

Conversely, other groups of Black viewers have felt recognized and empowered by controversial media texts like *The Color Purple* and *The Boondocks*. One of the women Bobo interviewed stated that she "felt a lot of pride in her Black brothers and sisters" while viewing the film and appreciated the acting performances, which were further legitimated through Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations.[35] The literature effectively illustrates that because of the varying social locations of Black audience members, Black consumers constructed meaning from media texts in a variety of ways; there was no one way to assess representation. Cornwell and Orbe found that *The Boondocks* resonated with Black readers who had grown up in predominantly white communities. While other readers of the comic strip might think that the depiction of Huey, Riley, Granddad, and their neighbors was stereotypical and offensive, the researchers found a significant portion identified with the narrative and posted messages like, "we have just relocated to Utah and find the [comic] strip is just what we need…thanks again your brotha in the struggle."[36] I found similar divisions amongst Black viewers in the literature examining Black reception of recent television, which I will expound upon later. Embedded in these discussions of Black representation are concerns about authenticity, and whether or not creators are "getting it right" and for what audience. As media historians have illustrated Black audiences have long been concerned with authenticity, especially when white artists craft stories. In her work on NBC's *Julia* (1968-1971), Aniko Bodroghkozy illustrates how Black viewers wrote to

[35] Bobo "The Color Purple" 218.
[36] Cornewell and Orbe, "Keepin' It Real," 33.

NBC to complain that they felt Diahann Carroll, as the titular character Julia, was a "white negro."[37] As Bodroghkozy argues, because the network and producers were so concerned about replicating negative stereotypes of African-Americans the show largely eschewed any ties to the African-American community or the realities of experiencing discrimination on the basis of race and placed Julia and her son Corey in an almost exclusively white world. As the literature suggests Black viewership is inherently active, and throughout history Black viewers have used the tools at their disposal to speak to not only each other, but to speak back to media institutions. The rise of social media platforms and their convergence with television have further collapsed many of the barriers between audience and industry, and viewers are able to discuss media representations immediately with individuals outside of their immediate networks as well as those behind a series. Similar to the Black viewers who wrote to NBC when *Julia* aired five decades ago, Black audiences are using the affordances of Twitter to immediately express their sentiments about current television programming.

While in this study I primarily focus on viewers who were fans of *Underground* and praised the series on Twitter, this literature illustrates how the specter of negative representations and stereotypes pervades Black reception of media texts. Since *Underground* is about the institution of slavery, depicted in narrative films primarily

[37] Aniko Bodroghkozy "Is This What You Mean by Color TV: Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC's Julia," in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer,* eds. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 145.

through a limiting white gaze,[38] the Black viewers I examine in this project are especially cognizant of how they are rendered on-screen. As an example, Johnetta Elzie, one of the organizers of protests in Ferguson, Missouri after Michael Brown was killed, tweeted "[t]his show honors our ancestors in a honest way. Resistance in a hopeful way" during the fourth episode of the first season.[39] Elzie's tweet illustrates how Black viewers were invested in *Underground* as a corrective on the misrepresentation of the enslaved.

Though not cited in all of the literature on Black audiences, Stuart Hall's scholarship was a necessary precursor. Researchers' analyses of the multiple ways Black audiences respond to media texts have been reliant on Hall's conception of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings.[40] Despite pushback from scholars about the neat delineation between each of these three categories, the scholarship on identity and media audiences I review here is largely indebted to Hall's formulations.[41] Audience reception scholarship and its varied methodological approaches are an implicit rejection of assertions about the passivity and homogeneity of film and television audiences.

While Black viewers have always had counterpublic spaces to discuss "their" shows and films — such as barber shops, hair salons, churches — new media technologies and the rise of new social media platforms have created new sites for these conversations and have made them highly visible. I join the research on the social

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[38] Some examples include, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927)*, The Littlest Rebel* (1935)*, Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Slaves* (1969), and *Jefferson in Paris* (1995).
[39] Johnetta Elzie, Twitter, March 30, 2016, https://twitter.com/Nettaaaaaaaa/status/715379694669922305
[40] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" in *Media Studies: A Reader,* eds. Paul Marris and Sue Thronham, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 47.
[41] Means Coleman, *Say It Loud*, 16.

dynamics of Black viewership with new media research on the cultural phenomenon of "Black Twitter" to illustrate how Black users have adapted Twitter as a public forum to discuss issues of race and representation. Though *Underground* viewers generated a mere fraction of tweets that a show like *Scandal* did every week, the community that developed over the course of the first season was highly interactive and engaged. Because of Black adoption of second screen viewing — where viewers use a second screen i.e. tablet, computer, or mobile device to engage with a media text while it's airing — and Twitter's defining characteristic, the hashtag, Black viewers can have conversations outside of their immediate networks and more easily create larger communities around television texts. Further, these conversations are documented on a public platform where observers, including researchers, can study these interactions.

### #OnHere: Black Twitter and Cultural Conversation

In her early work on race, identity, and the internet, Lisa Nakamura examines the ways in which Internet users "can describe themselves and their physical bodies in any way they like; they can perform their bodies as text."[42] The racial performativity that Nakamura introduces in her work is formative to later scholarship on the performance of racial authenticity on Black Twitter and the more recent scholarship presented in this section. For Black viewers of *Underground,* the performance of a Black American identity was linked to discussion of shared genealogy and the inherited trauma of chattel slavery. Because viewers were not physically with each other while watching, they

[42] Lisa Nakamura, "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the 'Internet'," *Works and Days, 13,* 1-2, (1995): 181.

signaled (or outright stated) their race in tweets to foster connection to other viewers. Additionally, I argue, they were creating a counterpublic space to in which assess, celebrate, and challenge the characterizations of slaves, plantation owners and overseers, white abolitionists, and slave resistance.

Building on Manuel Castel's notion of "counter-power," scholars have identified Black Twitter as a counterpublic space. As scholars Roderick Graham and Shawn Smith note, "the function of a counterpublic is to nurture group-specific discourses and also to develop strategies for affecting change in wider publics."[43] Finding most popular representations of slavery both inaccurate and inadequate, viewers tweeted about *Underground's* commitment to both accuracy and a narrative of resistance. For example, one user stated "Im so tired of slave movies showin' us bein' vulnerable all the time, glad this series gon' show the resistance #Underground." (Illustration 1)[44] Further, literature on Black Twitter has a few emergent themes: Twitter is a space where identity is performed; the specific features of the platform mediate said performance and whether or not it is understood by other users.[45]

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[43] Roderick Graham and Shawn Smith, "The Content of Our Characters: Black Twitter as Counterpublic," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, 2,* no. 4, (2016): 436.
[44] Twitter User, March 9, 2016.
[45] André Brock, "From the Black Hand Side: Twitter as Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012); Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on Black Twitter," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014).

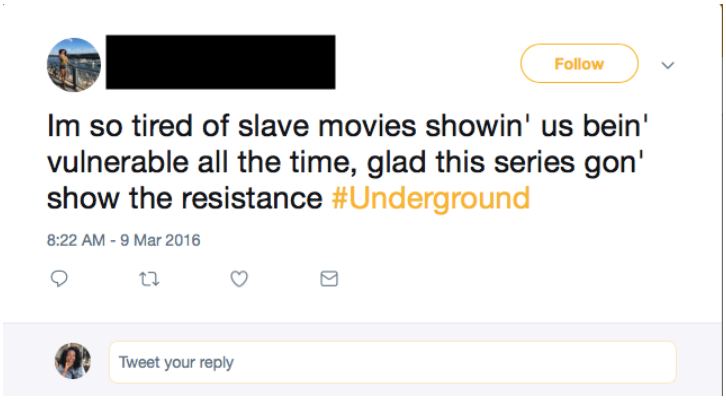


Illustration 1: Twitter user expressing excitement for *Underground*

Building on Henry Louis Gates's concept of "signifyin'"" and using critical discourse analysis, André Brock and Sarah Florini have identified the ways Twitter users "signify" their racial and cultural identities with limited space. Florini notes "signifyin'" requires participants to possess certain forms of cultural knowledge and cultural competencies…the required knowledge can range from familiarity with Black popular culture and celebrity gossip to the experiential knowledge of navigating U.S. culture as a racialized subject."[46] Although Florini does not specifically look at television or live-tweeting in her early research, she provides important context. Second screen viewing on Twitter provides a point of intersection between media and performance of identity in the digital space. Brock's research looks at Twitter as a platform uniquely fitted for use on a mobile device stating "Twitter's minimalist aesthetics and ease of material access play a role in Black adoption of the service."[47] Because of ease of use on a mobile device and the ability to communicate with individuals outside of one's immediate network, Twitter

[46] Ibid, 226-227.
[47] Ibid, 536.

has become both a "social public," as Brock notes, as well as a space for television audience engagement.[48] With this research project, I plan to identify and examine how Black viewers of *Underground* used Twitter as a space to perform Black identity through both "signifyin'" practices and by circulating discourses that engaged in the politics of Black representation.

**#TGIT: RACE, SHONDALAND, AND LIVE TWITTER VIEWING**

Ushered in by audience response to Shonda Rhimes's juggernaut *Scandal* (2012-2018), Black scholars (many of them women) have contributed to a growing body of work on audience reception practices on Twitter.[49] Dayna Chatman extends the research of Bobo and Cornwell & Orbe to illustrate how Black American viewers create communities through live-tweeting. Chatman's analysis of fan and anti-fan response to the season three premiere of *Scandal* examines how both Black fans and anti-fans develop discourses that extend discussions of representation outside of a good/bad binary.[50] Chatman's pithy chapter on *Scandal* fans and anti-fans cannot possibly account for all of the discourses around the series or explain the ways in which Black audiences engage in communal viewing on Twitter. Her framework of a "politics of viewing," however, provides a lens through which I can view and understand discourses surrounding reception of *Underground*'s first season.

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[48] Ibid, 534.
[49] Chatman, "Black Twitter and Scandal"; Vanessa Gonlin and Apryl Williams, "I Got All My Sister with Me (On Black Twitter): Second Screening of *How to Get Away with Murder* as a Discourse on Black Womanhood, *Information, Communication and Society,* 20, no. 7, (2017); Felicia L. Harris and Loren Saxton Coleman, "Trending Topics: A Cultural Analysis of Being Mary Jane and Black Women's engagement on Twitter," *The Black Scholar,* 48, no. 1, (2018).
[50] Chatman, "Black Twitter and Scandal," 305.

In a similar vein to Chatman's analysis of *Scandal* fans, Apryl Williams and Vanessa Gonlin's research is concerned with affirmational modes of engagement centered on joy at seeing one's self and cultural reality being depicted on screen. Looking at Black women's response to seeing Annalise Keating, the main character of *How to Get Away with Murder,* taking off her wig before bed, Gonlin and Williams stated, "removing a wig to reveal natural Black hair sparked intense emotions via the co-viewing discourse of tweeters. Some of the most prevalent words associated with Annalise taking off her wig include *real, raw, powerful,* and *inspiring.*" (emphasis original)[51] In like manner, the Black female viewers of *Being Mary Jane* whose tweets Felicia L. Harris and Loren Saxton Coleman analyzed used the network supported hashtag #BeautifullyFlawed to illustrate their identification with the protagonist's problems and appreciation for creator and showrunner Mara Brock Akil's ability to write complex Black female characters.[52] Harris and Saxton Coleman's research is interested in the ways in which producers and network executives use social media and hashtags to generate certain forms of audience engagement and identification with protagonists. Their research illustrated that "while BET attempted to regulate audience acceptance of and satisfaction with *Being Mary Jane* via hashtagging, viewers who engage online understand the significance of discourse in the meaning-making process and challenge attempts at imbuing social meaning that is not reflective of their lived experiences."[53] I include their findings here because I am interested in interrogating how the creators,

[51] Gonlin and Williams, "How to Get Away with Murder," 993.
[52] Harris and Saxton Coleman, "Being Mary Jane," 51.
[53] Ibid, 52.

actors, and producers of *Underground* attempted to convey specific meanings about the series for audiences to adopt and circulate.

This new crop of research analyzing Black women's response to contemporary representations of Black womanhood illustrates that Black audiences actively react to their depiction in varied ways and more research should analyze reception to other television programs. In addition to an interest in television's representation of slavery, I decided to focus this project on *Underground* because of the show's aesthetic and thematic differences. Pitched as a prestige period piece on a budding network concerned with "quality TV" over mass audience numbers, *Underground*'s goals and aims, especially on social media platforms, were slightly different than for a show like *How to Get Away with Murder* or *Scandal.* Further, though *Underground*, *Scandal,* and *How to Get Away with Murder* have Black leads, the networks and producers demonstrated differing goals about what types of audiences the shows sought to attract and what messages about Blackness they wanted viewers to receive. Lastly, *Underground's* focus on slavery places it firmly outside of the "colorblind" ideology scholars have attributed to Shonda Rhimes's productions.[54]

**MY STUDY**

The central question driving this research project is how do Black audiences interpret televisual representations of slavery and communicate those interpretations to a wider community of Black viewers. To begin to answer this question I draw on a variety

[54] Kristen Warner, "The Racial Logic of *Grey's Anatomy"*: Shonda Rhimes and her 'Post Civil Right' 'Post-Feminist' Series", *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7, (2015).

of theoretical frameworks; this project sits at the nexus of critical race studies, audience reception, and the convergence of television and new media. I will be engaging in this reception study, primarily through using discourse analysis, specifically critical technocultural discourse analysis.[55] Brock states "CTDA is a technique rather than a method; it draws energy from Nakamura's argument that Internet studies should match considerations of form, the user, and the interface with an attention to the ideologies that underlie them."[56] I turn to critical technocultural discourse analysis for this research to assess how the affordances and limitations of Twitter as platform structure Black discourse and how those affordances make Twitter compatible with live television viewing. Building on Brock's early research on "Black Twitter" and his methodology further joins work on "Black Twitter" with reception studies.

I started by examining how the affordances and restrictions of Twitter lead to certain modes of audience engagement during the first season of *Underground*. To answer the query at the center of this, I compiled and analyzed tweets from Black viewers from the first season (March 9, 2016-May 11, 2016). Broadcasts of *Underground* generated tens of thousands of tweets each week that it aired: because of the sheer number of tweets, instead of analyzing every single tweet produced in reference to the show, I narrowed my search and analysis to center a few central themes and searched using specific hashtags. Though the platform is constantly in flux, hashtagging remains one of the primary ways that users engage in ongoing conversations on the platform

[55] André Brock, "Black Twitter," 531.
[56] Ibid, 531.

especially in second-screen television viewing. To make sure that my sample is truly representative of the myriad ways that audience members engaged with the show on the platform, I looked past the official hashtags of #UndergroundWGN, #riseup and #breakfree. In addition to using industry created hashtags, viewers created their own hashtags to reflect in-group jokes that had developed throughout the season, to champion preferred romantic pairings, and to curate conversations about individual characters or plotlines each episode. One such example is #SlaveCatcherStabler to refer to August Pullman played by Chris Meloni whose most notable role is Elliot Stabler on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-). For this project, I paired the official and most widely used hashtag #UndergroundWGN with two created by Black fans of the series. The first that I explore in depth, #Noahlee, is a portmanteau of the two main characters names and represents viewers investment in their romantic relationship as the series unfolded. I selected this hashtag because it was fan created and immediately adopted by other viewers and by members of the cast and creative team. Further, since mostly women used #Noahlee to demonstrate their affective investment in this romantic pairing, #Noahlee provides the opportunity to conduct a more intersectional analysis by examining how Black women in particular are interpreting the series, its characters, and themes. Secondly, I select #WeOut to analyze in conjunction with #UndergroundWGN. Created by bloggers at *Black Nerd Problems,* #WeOut operated as what scholars like Sarah Florini refer to as a digital "ethnic enclave."[57] While the viewers of all races used

[57] Sarah Florini, "Enclaving and Cultural Resonance in Black *Game of Thrones* Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 29, (2019).

the shows official hashtags to live-tweet the series, #WeOut was created to be a Black space. Searching for these hashtags used in conjunction with the official hashtag was how I was able to specifically connect the tweets to the series and filter out unrelated material. Blending reception and platform analyses, I carefully consider how unique functions of Twitter including the hashtag structured audience reception, and specifically helped viewers communicate their subject positioning. In my analysis of tweets, in addition to language, I assess how additional media, especially GIFs and emojis[58], are used in live-tweeting.

My next research question is concerned with Dayna Chatman's formulation of a "politics of viewing," where I assess how viewers responded to the series beyond evaluating if the series was positively or negatively representing African-Americans. I will again be using critical technocultural discourse analysis to assess how Black viewers evaluated on-screen representations for accuracy and how they might potentially affect out-group perception of African-Americans. Further, I am interested in how they praised or critiqued those involved with the creation of the program about whether or not they effectively and accurately portrayed the characters and the larger historical time period. Black viewers of *Underground* spoke to each other and to those affiliated with the program about whether or not the show was "getting it right." In response to an article in *The Huffington Post* covering the show's promotional tour before the first season, a

[58] GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format) were created in 1987 and are an animated image format with the capacity for looping sequences. Emojis were created in 1998 by a Japanese engineer and are characters developed to communicate emotion and add nuance to text based communication. Emojis and GIFs continue to evolve as forms of digital communication.

Twitter user stated "@blackvoices @johnlegend Whatever you do don't whitewash it, keep it as authentic as possible! #UndergroundWGN." [59] This viewer's concerns about whitewashing and authenticity are borne of disappointment with previous narrativized depictions of slavery, which eschewed frank commentary on the ideological underpinnings of slavery and its relationship to American nation building in favor of illustrating white cruelty through a few outliers. The ways in which viewers, as well as the creators/writers, producers, and cast, thought of authenticity was demonstrated on Twitter extensively.

For this project, my analysis of Black audience reception also centers the work of industrial agents – the actors, writers/creators, and producers. Just as Twitter has become a space for audiences to discuss television with themselves and for them to speak to television creators and talent, industrial agents use the platform to generate buzz, interact with viewers, and most important to my study, structure audience reception. This project asserts that Twitter functions as an intermediary through which industrial agents can sanction certain readings of the text and guide audiences' meaning-making processes. Using CTDA, I compile tweets from co-creators/writers/executive producers Misha Green and Joe Pokaski from the series premiere to the season finale. I additionally assess tweets from stars Jurnee Smollett-Bell and Aldis Hodge, as well as executive producer John Legend. The variation in age and gender in this sample illustrates how both of these identity categories might structure participation on the platform and illustrate themes about how gender or age might influence the dialogic relationship between audience and

[59] Twitter User, March 12, 2016.

industry. While all five of these individuals engage in promotional labor, which I do examine, I am primarily interested in specific responses to individual viewers, the function of behind-the-scenes tidbits provided for the Twitter audience, and instances when these individuals provided readings of the text.

Relatedly, this research project relies on textual and paratextual analysis. I position the tweets I analyze from those affiliated with the series as paratexts, first defined in reference to literature by Gerard Genette as "texts that prepare us for other texts."[60] In this project I build on Jonathan Gray's research on paratexts and his analysis of affiliated materials like trailers and DVD bonus materials that structure reception.[61] These tweets contributed to narratives structured around the series that were a part of cast and creator interviews, trailers, and other official promotional materials. In the press tour before the premiere of the show, the creators and cast members repeated a phrase to define the tone and ethos of the series: "It's not about the occupation, it's about the resistance." Not only did this work to assure viewers that this series would be markedly different than early representations of meek, happy slaves, it linked the series to discourses of resistance from the Black Lives Matter movement. Premiering almost two years after Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, whose death in Ferguson, Missouri and the subsequent protests helped spark the Black Lives Matter Movement, *Underground* attempted to respond to the desire for representations of Black resistance. In a similar vein to the brave activists that protested in Ferguson that proclaimed, "This

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[60] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts,* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 25.
[61] Ibid.

ain't yo mama's civil rights movement," *Underground* was seemingly arguing, "This ain't yo mama's slave story." Analysis of official promotional materials shared on the series website and social media accounts prior to the series premiere, in addition to the tweets of Green, Pokaski, Hodge, Smollett-Bell, and Legend, will illuminate how the narrative around the show was constructed, how *Underground* was branded, and what audiences were meant to take away.

This project also engages in the auto-ethnographic tradition of fan studies scholarship.[62] I recognize my position as not just a scholar whose work is rooted in critical race and feminist scholarship, but also as a fan of the program I am writing about. In the spring of 2016, I read reviews, watched cast interviews, and most importantly live-tweeted every episode of the inaugural season. Because of both my extensive knowledge of the show and the myriad ways that viewers engaged with the material, I have the appropriate background knowledge to be attentive to the context of individual tweets. Further, through self-reflection, I hope to mitigate some of the potential blind spots that come with being so well versed in both the television show and its community of viewers. Finally, although all of the tweets I am using are from public accounts, scholars have noted how social media and the changing notion of the audience has blurred distinctions between the public and the private, so it is imperative that I am attentive to

[62] See, Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers,* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Kristina Busse, "The Ethics of Studying Online Fandom," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom,* ed. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2017).

the potential harm publishing tweets can do.[63] While it is pertinent to my project to identify those affiliated with the show in my analysis, I will not be using the handles or names of individual viewers who live-tweeted the series; instead, I refer to them as users and the images I include of their tweets have their handles and names redacted. In the following chapters, I examine specific hashtags and illustrate how those affiliated with the show capitalized on the platform not only to build rapport with viewers, but to facilitate appropriate readings of the text.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

*Chapter 1:*

In the present chapter, I detail my theoretical and methodological framework and introduce readers to my study of both the series *Underground* and how I will study the community that formed around it. I have included a review of relevant literature on Black audience reception, race and second-screen viewing, and Black Twitter. This project's introduction is designed to orient readers to prior work on Black audiences and detail that frameworks my own work builds on.

*Chapter 2:*

This chapter will look at the specific genre conventions of Twitter as a platform and how Black viewers of *Underground* capitalized on the affordances of the platform to make statements about the show in real time. Building on Brock and Florini's analysis of

[63] danah boyd and Alice E. Marwick, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately": Twitter Users, Context Collapse and the Imagined Audience," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011); Bethan Jones, " 'I Hate Beyoncé and I Don't Care Who Knows It': Towards and Ethics of Studying Anti-Fandom," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 4, no. 3 (2016).

signifyin' and recent research on the rise of social TV, I seek to illustrate how viewers communicated their racial identities in their tweeted responses to the series through looking at emoji usage and hashtagging practices. Additionally, this chapter adds gender as an axis of inquiry by examining how Black women "shipped" the two main characters and displayed their positive affective investment in the central romantic plotline in the series. I additionally examine #WeOut to illustrate how Black viewers create ethnic enclaves to shield their discussions from outside populations.

*Chapter 3:*

The third and final chapter of this project is concerned with how the creators/writers, cast members, and producers used Twitter to discuss *Underground* during live broadcasts. Using Jonathan Gray's research on media paratexts, I position the tweets from those affiliated with the series as paratexts worthy of critical consideration. I am especially interested in not just Twitter's role as a platform for promotion, but how industrial agents used the space of Twitter as an intermediary forum where they could more directly affect audience reception. I analyze several instances when those behind the series engage directly with specific viewers, provide behind the scenes insights, and finally, how they deploy information to promote sanctioned understandings of the text.

## CHAPTER TWO: Raced Hashtags: Black Twitter, Social TV, and *Underground*

"My phone will be fully charged and my Twitter Thumbs will be locked and loaded. #UndergroundWGN #WeOut #BreakFree" –*Underground* Viewer on Twitter (04/18/16)

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After helping to develop successful series *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010) and *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014) for FX, Matt Cherniss, previously Senior Vice President of Original Programming at FX, moved to WGN America and immediately started putting projects in the pipeline that would help rebrand WGN America into a cable network known for their prestige dramas similar to FX or AMC. [64] In 2014, the network began with *Salem* (2014-2017) and *Manhattan* (2014-2016). Two years later, *Outsiders* (2016-2017) and *Underground* (2016-2017) continued the vision Cherniss developed for the network; where both series established themselves as ratings successes from the start, which lent credence to Cherniss's vision for the network.[65] For a fledgling cable channel, previously associated with syndicated reruns and The Chicago Cubs, WGN America needed to attract as many viewers as possible, especially in the 18-49 demographic, meaning strategic promotion was key. Likely influenced by ratings juggernauts like Shonda Rhimes's TGIT lineup and Nielsen's decision to aggregate and publish data about television trending on social media, WGN America made efforts to curate viewing

[64] Christine Becker, "WGN America: From Chicago to Cable's Very Own," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels,* ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 103.
[65] Ibid, 103.

communities on Twitter.[66] No series was more successful at this than *Underground*, with an official account that has tweeted over 14,000 times and has approximately 52,000 followers; for comparison *Outsiders* had under 20,000. While those numbers are not especially high and are trounced by series like *Empire* (FOX, 2015-) or *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018) (both with follower counts over one million), for a new series on a relatively unknown cable network, *Underground* trended on Twitter each week of the first season. The community of Black viewers that tuned in to the live broadcast each week and communicated their thoughts about the episodes to their social networks largely propelled *Underground's* success.

Despite vastly changing forms of television viewership brought on by access to new media technologies, Americans still predominantly consume television through live viewing; this method of viewership is still privileged by television networks.[67] Further, "on-air broadcasting also still commands the highest advertising prices in the television industry, which is one of the main reasons, network, cable, and satellite distributors remain invested in strategies that will promote live television viewing."[68] As television has become more enmeshed with new media, Twitter has stood out as a specific tool to encourage and promote liveness.

In this chapter, I apply literature on the new phenomenon of "social TV" and on the affordances of digital media platforms and communication forms to my examination

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[66] In 2013 Nielsen announced that they would start measuring Twitter conversation about live television, https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-room/2013/nielsen-launches-nielsen-twitter-tv-ratings.html
[67] Eleanor Patterson, "Must Tweet TV: ABC's TGIT and the Cultural Work of Programming Social Television," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 26 (2018).
[68] Ibid, 1.4.

of the specific practices in the *Underground* viewing community. I begin this chapter by explaining some of the conventions of live-tweeting and how Twitter's unique design both promotes this form of audience engagement and structures discussion of a minoritzed subject positioning. Black viewers capitalized on certain affordances of the platform, including the use of emojis with dark skin tones and Twitter's GIF repository, to communicate their own positionality and engage with some of the more ludic properties of the platform. I then move on to two hashtags used by segments of the *Underground* audience across the first season. #NoahLee, created by a fan of the series and immediately adopted and circulated by star Jurnee Smollett-Bell, is a portmanteau of the two main characters Noah and Rosalee. This hashtag illustrates the series' primary "ship," or romantic pairing.[69] My analysis of this hashtag centers on female viewers and examines their investment in the romance of two Black characters whose relationship develops underneath dangerous and uncertain circumstances. I additionally use #WeOut, developed by editors at popular blog *Black Nerd Problems*, to illustrate how the properties, especially humorous, of Black Twitter function in live-tweeting, specifically for a series whose tonality is seemingly incompatible with the frequently comical nature of Black Twitter. Employing critical technocultural discourse analysis and participant observation, I demonstrate the contours of the unique viewing community that formed around *Underground.*

[69] The term ship, a shortened form of relationship, is used to describe a romantic pairing that fans of a media text (or celebrities) demonstrate an emotional investment in.

## THIS SHOW IS FIRE!: DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND LIVE-TWEETING

In their work assessing the specific function of live-tweeting during a television broadcast, Stephen Harrington, Tim Highfield, and Alex Bruns conceptualize of Twitter as the "virtual lounge room."[70] They posit "Twitter becomes a metaphorical 'watercooler' in the cloud, but one where the watercooler conversations take place instantly rather than at work the following morning." [71] Every week that *Underground* aired, a plethora of Black viewers gathered around a virtual watercooler to discuss the week's episode. In tracking these real time conversations, I became immediately interested in the ways in which individuals performed their racial identities online and how Twitter worked as a platform that complements liveness. Twitter has undergone various aesthetic and structural changes since its debut in 2006, and as the platform develops and new ways of communicating are integrated into its structure, Black viewers have adopted the new affordances and utilized them to position themselves as part of a racialized minority group.[72] In this section, I am interested in how the performative nature of Black Twitter intersects with the affordances of Twitter. I will be primarily examining uses of emoji and GIFs, both unavailable on Twitter when it launched, to illustrate central themes surrounding Black communication and to expand on the formative scholarship on race and the platform published before users had access to new technologies like emoji and GIFs for their tweets.

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[70] Stephen Harrington, Tim Highfield, and Alex Bruns, "More than a Backchannel: Twitter and Television," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 406.
[71] Ibid, 406.
[72] As an example Twitter has doubled the character counts of tweets from 140 to 280 and implemented a "quote tweet" function to more easily respond to others' tweets.

**Emojis and Representing Blackness**

When Sarah Florini's essay on Black Twitter was published in 2013, several of the functions heavily used in the *Underground* community were not yet available. While her formative scholarship on the ways Black users employed language to signify their race when corporeal signifiers could not be relied on is a necessary precursor to my own research, I seek to extend her analysis by incorporating some of the new platform affordances introduced in the intervening years between when Florini wrote "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin'" and when *Underground* premiered in the spring of 2016. Florini contends that on Black Twitter,

> signifyin' serves as an interactional framework that allows Black Twitter users to align themselves with Black oral traditions, to index Black cultural practices, to enact Black subjectivities, and to communicate shared knowledge and experiences.[73]

All of the following elements of signifyin' were a part of discourse surrounding *Underground* on Twitter, but were communicated in ways beyond text. To close her analysis, Florini briefly discusses how race can be signified nonverbally on the platform through her discussion of the use of emoticons to mimic facial expressions. Emoticons were developed by a Carnegie Mellon University computer science professor in 1982 as a way to clarify sarcasm and jokes embedded in text, and as computers continued to structure communication their use became increasingly embedded in everyday

[73] Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on Black Twitter," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014): 224.

conversation.[74] Emoticons are primarily constructed using symbols and or numbers to convey expressions, for example :-). New technological affordances, however, have made many emoticons rather moot. Taking their place are emojis, available as a part of smart phones keyboards and additionally available on Twitter's interface so desktop users can deploy them.

Described by *Wired* as the "lingua franca for the digital age," the first emoji was created by Japanese artist Shigetaka Kurita in 1999.[75] In 2010, due to efforts headed by Google, the emoji was officially adopted by Unicode and less than a decade later has become a primary form of digital communication.[76] As Luke Stark and Kate Crawford note, "with only 144 pixels each–18 bytes–an emoji must compress the face or object it represents into the most schematic configuration possible to achieve its symbolic affect."[77] In other words, as emojis are used by large swaths of the population with the necessary technological access, emojis are designed to be able to be used across cultures and languages and, as Stark and Crawford argue, standardize affect. However, it is important to note that despite attempts at standardization, companies that create emoji or embed them in their platforms do not have full control over how users engage with their technological affordances. In their essay urging more research on "visual social media," Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver discuss the polysemic nature of emojis, which can be

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[74] Luke Stark and Kate Crawford, "The Conservatism of Emoji: Work, Affect, and Communication," *Social Media and Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 3.
[75] Arielle Pardes, "The Wired Guide to Emoji," *Wired,* February 1, 2018, https://www.wired.com/story/guide-emoji/
[76] Ibid.
[77] Stark and Crawford, "Conservatism of Emoji," 4.

exemplified by eggplant, peach, and taco emojis. They state, "the eggplant, peach, and taco emoji, for instance, can represent their respective food stuffs, but are also stand-ins for parts of the body not featured in their own emoji: the penis, the butt, and the vagina. The symbolism here has also meant that emoji are used for content and communication not necessarily endorsed by platforms." [78] As I will demonstrate, emojis' adoption and use by African-Americans on digital platforms also illustrates the ways that emojis can be adapted to the conventions of African-American Vernacular English and can circulate counterpublic discourses.

Most resonant in my application of the emoji to the Black viewers of *Underground,* is the integration of varying skin tones in 2015. Previously, the default emoji for people or body parts was depicted as white, however, with the change the "white" or the light-skin option become one of five skin tones, while the default tone converted to a distinctly non-human yellow.[79] As Bethany Berard notes changes and additions in emoji options are critically important; she states, "…while seemingly innocuous, the deliberative process that leads to which emoji are made is a significant site of cultural power, as those who set the factors for inclusion and exclusion…are responsible for setting part of the contemporary digital visual lexicon."[80] The Unicode Consortium that makes decisions about which emojis to introduce and how they are

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[78] Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver, "Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: Studying Visual Social Media, from Selfies and GIFs to Memes and Emoji," *Communication Research and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2016) (n.p.)
[79] Robinson Meyer, "Finally, Emoji People of Color," *The Atlantic,* February 23, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/02/finally-emoji-people-of-color/385843/
[80] Bethany Berard, "I Second That Emoji: The Standards, Structures, and Social Production of Emoji," *First Monday* 23, no. 9 (2018) n.p.

pictorially represented set the default for human as white, reinforcing the marginalization of people with darker skin across the world. Due to the aforementioned lack of corporeal signifiers to indicate race, many people of color, especially Black users, started using darker skin tones once they were made available. While research has shown that white smartphone and social media users in the United States are much less likely to use the light skin tone emojis, preferring to use the default non-human yellow tone influenced by *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989-), use of the medium to dark skin tones is quite popular across social media platforms that integrate emojis.[81] In line with their understanding of themselves as the raceless default, white Americans differ largely from users of color. They especially differ from Black users who see the integration of different skin tones as a step forward for representation and have readily adopted the new options.

Viewers of *Underground* used several emojis in a few different ways, mainly to communicate their reaction to specific moments in the narrative, to illustrate solidarity with or disdain for a character(s), or to pictorially represent an actual scene. Quite common across all of the episodes, was the use of the Black fist emoji in one of the two darkest skin tones. Imbued with immense symbolism, the raised Black fist became widely recognized as a symbol of Black resistance after the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City where Tommie Smith and John Carlos donned black gloves and raised their fists one the winner's platform while the National Anthem played as they received their gold and

[81] Andrew McGill, "Why White People Don't Use White Emoji," *The Atlantic,* May 9, 2016 https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/white-people-dont-use-white-emoji/481695/

bronze medals, aligning them with human rights struggles, especially the Black Power Movement, both in the United States and around the world.


Illustration 2: Examples of tweets from viewers using emojis with dark skin.

I posit that in using the Black fist emoji in concert with discussion of *Underground* during live-tweeting, Black viewers not only sought to illustrate their racial identity, but also used the emoji to symbolically link Black oppression from the 19th century (the show's setting), to 1968, to 2016 (when the first episode aired). The raised fist emoji communicated several overlapping meanings, including but not limited to, that there were several throughlines between contemporary Black oppression and slavery, that viewers supported the characters' decision to escape bondage, and that viewers stood in solidarity with the enslaved characters. As noted by Tim Highfield, "emoji …are further visual mediators which can allow additional affective information to be provided, to depict the

user's mood and intentions."[82] For example, in response to series star Aldis Hodge tweeting his line "Fight for it." during the broadcast of episode three, "The Lord's Day," one user tweeted that "we" (meaning Black people) are still fighting. Her inclusion of a Black fist indicates that she is referencing the systemic oppression that Black Americans have been fighting since slavery or relatedly, that we are still fighting white supremacy. Similarly, another viewer, Johnetta Elzie who notably organized protestors in Ferguson, MO, compliments Rosalee for indicating her romantic interest in Noah. Stating Noah is "woke, armed, and will do anything by 'any means necessary' to get free," she likens Noah to Malcolm X.[83]

Lastly, during the fourth episode "Firefly" Noah and Rosalee are on the run from The Macon Plantation. As they run through woods and swamps, they hear the sounds of dogs and paddy rollers on their heels. Rosalee stops running, alarming Noah, as she spots familiar plants, and a plan dawns on her. As a house slave who had never set foot off of The Macon Plantation, Rosalee is initially wary of running and doesn't think she has the strength or endurance to make the journey, regardless of her dreams for a different life and affection for Noah. Despite her doubts, escaping an attempted rape by the plantation overseer pushes her to flee at the end of the third episode. Through the character of Rosalee and her mother Ernestine (Amirah Vann), co-creators and writers Misha Green and Joe Pokaski illustrate the limitations of assumptions that life for slaves in the house

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[82] Tim Highfield, "Emoji Hashtags // Hashtag Emoji: Of Platforms, Visual Affect, and Discursive Flexibility," *First Monday* 23, no. 9 (2018): n.p.

[83] "By any means necessary" comes from Malcolm X's famous speech gave at the founding rally for The Association for Afro-American Unity in 1964.

was “easier” than for those who worked in the fields; additionally, Rosalee and Ernestine continuously demonstrate ingenuity that aids in the group’s escape. In this scene, Rosalee starts rapidly picking flowers and positions them so the hunting dogs will ingest them. Because of the gardening duties she was always forced to perform, she knew that the flowers were poisonous and her quick thinking gives her and Noah the chance to escape the slave catchers who were gaining ground on them. In the tweet in Illustration 2, a Black viewer picked up on Green and Pokaski’s intentions, stating “There is no survival without the Black woman.” Her use of emoji is worth exploring in depth. Using a Black queen, a Black fist, and a Black hand getting a manicure, this user firmly links Black resistance efforts to Black femininity. At the start of the series, leadership is masculinized because Noah is depicted as the group’s leader who has the vision to develop a plan for escape. However, as the season progresses, Rosalee comes into her own and demonstrates to both herself and audiences how formidable she really is and the utility of the feminized skills she gained as a house slave. In promotional materials for the series, showrunners Misha Green and Joe Pokaski liken The Macon 7 to the original Justice League. Green and Pokaski, who first worked together in the writer’s room for *Heroes* (NBC, 2006-2010), continually discussed their inclusion of tropes from the superhero genre into the series of *Underground*. In fact, they position the first season of the series as an origin story of sorts for Rosalee. Initially convinced that she doesn’t possess the strength to leave The Macon Plantation, the season closes with Rosalee teaming up with Harriet Tubman to risk her freedom to free more slaves. While in the pilot *Underground* seemingly positions Noah as the hero and sole leader of the core

group of escaped slaves, it's Rosalee who receives the hero's arc throughout the season. The third featured tweet in Illustration 2 uses an emoji of a Black woman/girl with a crown, a bouquet emoji, and an emoji of a Black woman painting her nails pink, this Twitter user is deploying emoji to extend the meaning of the text in her tweet. Her statement that "there is no survival without the black woman" illustrates how integral Black women, and specifically their "feminized" knowledge sets, have been in resistance efforts throughout time. This is especially pertinent considering how often Black women's contributions to justice movements are rendered invisible in historical accounts and retellings. Green and Pokaski reject assumptions about Rosalee's "easy" life working inside of the plantation house and illustrate just how integral the capacities she developed laboring in the domestic space are to the group's freedom.

In addition to use of a Black fist emoji, several Black viewers used the flame emoji as part of their tweets. Flames were at times used to reflect the diegesis, like in episode four "Firefly" when Cato (Alano Miller) sets fire to the cotton fields to create a diversion; they were also used to express excitement, passion, or to compliment those involved with the series. Though not explicitly raced in the same way as a raised fist, the flames emoji, now widely circulated on Twitter, is used to stand in for words like "flames," "fire," or "lit" and has roots in Black vernacular. For example, at the beginning of the pilot one user tweeted, "The opening song was 'Black Skinhead' by Yeezus! #BreakFree @UndergroundWGN It's Lit! (eight consecutive flame emojis)." The use of the flames here are a pictorial representation of slang term lit, but they also extend the meaning of the term to indicate that the opening scene and the song itself are both "fire,"

or very good. By the same token, another user tweeted "#UndergroundWGN just WOW!!!! (fire emoji) (fire emoji) I'm hooked! #BreakFree @UndergroundWGN #yess #tellit #OurStory." As Highland notes, these emojis offer an additional affective dimension to viewers' tweets and can operate on multiple levels of meaning. Despite not being available at the time that André Brock and Sarah Florini were writing their formative essays identifying the main tenets of Black Twitter, the new addition of emojis fit into the schemas of Black Twitter that both scholars sketched out, especially their ability to invoke Black vernacular in limited space.

Emojis have become an integral component on the platform since their introduction. Used to represent the users' physical bodies (or components of it like a fist or two hands clapping) to specific activities or objects, emojis continue to be used in inventive ways on the platform to communicate information in limited space. In the case of Black viewers of *Underground*, emoji were used to illustrate viewers' race and their response to elements of the narrative simultaneously. Further, emojis that were not explicitly raced through a skin tone are still used to communicate a racial identity. Returning to research on Twitter and the public sphere, specifically research on Black Twitter as a counterpublic space, if we consider Twitter as a site where multiple publics with different norms and uses of language interact, emoji use is one more way that Black users have adapted Twitter's affordances to create intragroup discourse.

**GIFs and Black Cultural Exchange**

In February of 2016, one month before the series premiere of *Underground,* Twitter announced that they were partnering with online GIF platforms Giphy and Riffsy to add a native GIF search to the platform.[84] While users had already been including GIFs from other websites to their tweets, Twitter was adding this affordance in line with other platforms like Facebook Messenger and Tinder who had just recently implemented native GIF searches. Similar to emojis, during live-tweeting episodes of *Underground,* GIFs illustrated the ways that Black viewers communicated affect and made the affordances of the platform compatible with African American vernacular.

Mostly used throughout the 1990s and early aughts as a crude looped graphic that would indicate that a website was under construction, GIFs found a pairing with social media platforms in the mid-2000s through MySpace, where profile customization became an integral affordance of the platform.[85] Jason Eppink notes that while Facebook and Twitter distanced themselves from MySpace's aesthetics, Tumblr allowed users to upload GIFs from when they launched. As GIFs have matured as a visual form, however, they have been widely adopted as a digital form of communication, and in 2011 "GIFs started to be posted in response to, and often in lieu of, text online."[86] In the case of Black viewers of *Underground*, many used Twitter's new GIF repository to react to parts of the narrative.

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[84] Casey Newton, "Twitter Rolls Out Native GIF Search Powered by Giphy and Riffsy," *The Verge,* February 17, 2016, https://www.theverge.com/2016/2/17/11027724/twitter-GIF-search-giphy-riffsy
[85] Jason Eppink, "A Brief History of the GIF (So Far)," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3, 302.
[86] Ibid, 303.

In their discussion of the communicative affordances of GIFs Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield discuss their use as a way to perform affect and also note their inherent polysemy.[87] Viewers have increasingly used reaction GIFs during second-screen viewing; as Miltner and Highfield state, "the cultural practices around reaction GIFs have contributed to the development of rhetorical styles using GIFs, allowing the user to provide a visual representation of how they are feeling." [88] Reaction GIFs are especially well suited to second-screen viewing and live-tweeting practices because users are able to perform their reactions to episodes to a broader community of viewers they do not share physical space with. In examining the usage of GIFs by viewers of *Underground,* I found that many viewers used GIFs that featured Black celebrities, ones that derived from Black media texts, or GIFs from media texts that had been adopted by Black Twitter (like uses of Kermit the Frog), which is in line with Florini's assertion that part of Black Twitter is displaying cultural competencies.

For example, one user tweeted "WHAT?! Cato, you're the truth! Let! It! Burn! #UndergroundWGN #BreakFree #WeOut" and included the infamous GIF of Angela Bassett turning her back on her ex's burning car after she set it aflame in *Waiting to Exhale* (1995). In this instance, this GIF's meaning functions on multiple levels; it literally displays a character setting fire to the property of someone who has wronged her, which is analogous to Cato setting fire to the cotton fields of The Macon Plantation. While the casual observer might recognize the expression of a woman scorned on Angela

[87] Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF," *Social Media and Society* 3, no.3 (2017), 4.
[88] Ibid, 5.

Bassett's face, for those that had seen *Waiting to Exhale* the use of the GIF offered additional layers of meaning, especially considering this film is recognized as part of the Black film canon. This tweet also illustrates Miltner and Highfield's claim that "the performance of cultural knowledge tends to come from more niche texts."[89] In a similar vein to emoji usage, viewers of *Underground* utilized the new affordance of GIFs to visually communicate their response to the series; however, because many GIFs are culled from existing media entities and due to GIFs affordance of endless repetition meant that they offered a distinct way to communicate a racial identity and for viewers to engage with the series.

### "Well it's nice to meet you proper Ms. Rose": Cataloging "All the Feels" in #Noahlee

In cast interviews, Aldis Hodge and Jurnee Smollett-Bell, who play leads Noah and Rosalee, are frequently asked to discuss what is known as "the gaze." Starting from the pilot, viewers of *Underground* receive clear indication that a romantic subplot is brewing between the two leads. Their first meeting, where Rosalee bandages Noah's slashed back and attends to his seemingly hurt leg quickly becomes filled with a charged energy. Because they operate in the separate realms of the house and the field, Noah and Rosalee almost never interact, but after their first meeting, their eyes continually find each other from across the plantation. At the close of episode two "War Chest," Noah and Rosalee gaze at each other from across a plantation dance then slowly come closer and closer together as the R&B instrumentals and crooning voice of The Weekend tell the

[89] Ibid, 7.

audience an important moment between the two is about to happen; then Noah delivers the words that solidify his interest in Rosalee, "Run with me."

Six days prior to the premiere of "War Chest," a Black, female Twitter user tweeted "I Think #NoahLee Is The New Ship Name For Rosalee & Noah (heart eyes emoji) (crying while laughing emoji) @jurneesmollett @AldisHodge." Jurnee Smollett-Bell replied from her official account that day: "Hahahahah!!!! I like it! #NoahLee what you think @AldisHodge ? #UndergroundWGN," and thus, #Noahlee was born. #Noahlee can be situated within a long line of relationship portmanteaus and their ties to fan shipping practices.[90] Some examples from other television series include Destiel a combination of Dean and Castiel from *Supernatural* (WB 2005-2006, CW 2006-), Sterek, Stiles and Derek from *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011-2017), and IchAbbie, Ichabod and Abbie, *Sleepy Hollow* (FOX, 2013-2017); ship, of course, being a shortening of "relationship." Examining use of #NoahLee, primarily by Black females, extends recent research about Black women's fandom on Twitter and illustrates a few themes about this viewing community. The Black women using #Noahlee when they live-tweeted the broadcast each week illustrated how the affective dimensions of the platform and of shipping generally could create counternarratives about the emotionality of Black women, they linked to Black cultural competencies by relating NoahLee to celebrity Black couples,

[90] See Christine Scodari and Jenna L Felder. "Creating a Pocket Universe" 'Shippers,' Fan Fiction and The X-Files Online," *Communication Studies* 51, no. 3, (2000); Rebecca Williams, "'Wandering Off Into Soap Land:' Fandom, Genre, and 'Shipping' The West Wing," *Participations* 8, no. 1, (2011); Leora Hadas, "Resisting the Romance: 'Shipping' and the Discourse of Genre Uniqueness in Doctor Who Fandom," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3, (2013).

and demonstrated an investment in a Black relationship prevailing under the harshest of circumstances.

In the second episode, #NoahLee took off. In her pioneering work, and what remains the only book length examination of Black women's role as media consumers, Jacqueline Bobo identifies Black women as "interpretive communities," stating, "as cultural producers critics, and members of an audience the women are positioned to intervene strategically in the imaginative construction, critical interpretation, and social condition of black women." [91] I position #NoahLee as a "strategic intervention" focused on Black women's ability to be the center of a romance. Identifying her own interpretive strategies while watching the television adaptation of Alex Haley's *Queen* (CBS, 1993), Kristen J. Warner uses her investment in the relationship between Easter (Jasmine Guy) and James (Tim Daly) to frame her discussion of Black women's relationship with the tumultuous and illicit coupling of Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) and President Fitzgerald Grant (Tony Goldwyn) in ABC's *Scandal*.[92] Warner has written extensively on *Scandal* and Black women's affective investment in the series. In her analysis of *Scandal* and Black women's fandom, Kristen Warner dissects Black female fans' investment in the romantic subplots of the series that position main character Olivia Pope as the object of desire for two accomplished white men, one of them The President of The United States. She states, "for a fandom eager to feel desired and in control of their

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[91] Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 27.
[92] Kristen J. Warner, "If Loving Olitz is Wrong, I Don't Want to be Right: ABC's Scandal and the Affect of Black Female Desire," *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 1, (2015): 46.

own romantic fates, this particular love triangle is especially exciting."[93] While some of the tweets using #NoahLee were similar to the fan discussion centered on desirability that Warner identified in her research on *Scandal*, the unique subject positioning of Rosalee as an enslaved young woman and the plot twists centering on narrativized realities of enslaved Black persons meant that the Black female fans that tweeted about Noah and Rosalee's romance were less concerned with their sexual relationship (in fact, the two characters have intercourse once in the season one finale "The White Whale") and what it signaled. They were more interested in watching a budding romance develop under harsh conditions and extrapolating about what Noahlee signified about Black love more broadly.

In addition, I identify Black women's investment in Noahlee as a response to ways Black women's sexuality and romantic lives have been depicted on-screen, especially as slaves. Black female archetypes present in media culture, including The Mammy, the Jezebel, and The Sapphire have their roots in American chattel slavery. Positioned in opposition to each other, The Mammy and The Jezebel represent two ends of the spectrum of Black women's sexuality. Rarely afforded nuance in their on screen depictions, Black women have frequently, been depicted as sexless or incredibly hypersexualized. This trend is even more acute in representations of American slavery, most notable in films like *Gone With the Wind* (1939), where Hattie McDaniel's character Mammy is completely void of any sexual identity, focuses almost solely on

[93] Kristen J. Warner, "ABC's Scandal and Black Women's Fandom," in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Lady Porn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century,* ed. Elana Levine, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2015): 46.

Scarlett O'Hara, and puts the needs to the white family who owns her before any of her own. There are no mammies in *Underground.* In her discussion of her response to *Queen* as a young girl, Warner discusses how despite power differentials between Easter and James, *Queen* was one of the few times she was able to see Black women desired on screen before the premiere of *Scandal.*[94] As I have stated, viewers of Underground were less concerned with Rosalee's sexual relationship (here age becomes another factor that differentiates her from Olivia Pope, as we can determine that Rosalee is in her late teens or early twenties) and more about her being the object of romantic interest.

Positioned as neither hypersexualized or devoid of all sexual and romantic interest, the creators and writers of *Underground* took care to make sure that Rosalee's character was afforded nuance. Simultaneously, Misha Green and Joe Pokaski were clear that because Rosalee is enslaved, she does not solely determine her sexuality and romantic prospects. In a chilling scene in episode two, "War Chest," Rosalee enters the parlor to serve brandy to a group of wealthy white plantation owners, two of whom (decades her senior) immediately indicate their sexual interest in her. As their menacing bodies get closer and closer and trap her between them, the audience is forced to reckon with how the threat of sexual violence consistently follows Rosalee. At the close of the episode, Noah asks Rosalee to run away with him. In response to Jurnee Smollett-Bell's tweet repeating Noah's line "Run with me," one Black female user tweeted "Boy that sounded like a love song to my ears Noah keep saying something right." Other responses to this line include one user stating, "I am truly loving #UndergroundWGN

[94] Warner, "Olitz," 16-20.

@AldisHodge and @jurneesmollett are relationship goals (crying laugh emoji) (crying laugh emoji) #Noahlee #RunWithMe" which included a photo of Rosalee patching up Noah's back during their first meeting. Additionally, the official *Underground* account engaged with another user that said "…@UndergroundWGN episode 2 is up. Just watched it. Gr8est expression of love I may have ever heard… 'Run with me.'," stating "we are loving #Noahlee! (heart emoji)(heart emoji)". These three viewers, and the rest of the Black women that tweeted during or after the "Run with me" moment, indicated that Noah's decision to include Rosalee in his plan to escape deeply affected them. This moment illustrated that Noah offered Rosalee not just a chance to escape the horrors of life on The Macon Plantation, but that he would attempt to give her a future where she was not only free, but where a reciprocal relationship built on their romantic connection could thrive.

The inclusion of heart and heart eyes emojis, GIFs of Oprah crying, and the use of several exclamation points also illustrated Black women's deep affective investment in this romantic pairing. I contend that Black women's outpouring of emotion in response to developments in Noah and Rosalee's romantic plot existed as a counternarrtive to current conceptions of Black women as either emotionless or angry. Further, these Black women continually used language prevalent in female fan communities including saying that Noah and Rosalee gave them "the feels" or identifying Noahlee as a viewers' "ship." These types of tweets were especially prevalent during Noah and Rosalee's first kiss in episode four "Firefly." In the episode prior, Noah is forced to abandon his carefully laid out plan and the other slaves he has recruited when Rosalee is assaulted by plantation

overseer Bill Meeks (PJ Marshall), forcing them to flee ahead of schedule. As soon as night falls and they are temporarily "safe," in an act of immense bravery, Noah tells Rosalee that he is temporarily leaving her to go back for the other slaves he left behind, but promised to help escape. Though she is initially terrified to be left alone, he gives her the confidence she needs and assures her he will be back. Immediately after, the couple share their first kiss. In response, one Black female fan tweeted "#NOAHLEE is real!!! The ship liiivvvvessssss (heart eyes emoji, heart eyes emoji, heart eyes emoji) #UndergroundWGN #WeOut." Clearly, this demonstrates an intense emotional reaction to the first physical manifestation of their budding relationship. Similarly, another fan tweeted, "A #Noahlee kiss! My newest OTP, le sigh. #UndergroundWGN #BreakFree" and included a GIF whose caption reads "Permission to SQUEEEEEE!" (Illustration 3). Conversant in the lingo of fandom, these Black women use words and phrases like ship, OTP (one true pairing), and squee to illustrate their deep affective investment in the relationship between these characters and the joy seeing them kiss brought them.[95] Further, their tweets position *Underground*, a period drama about slavery not normally of the same genre most associated with fan shipping practices, and the relationship between Noah and Rosalee as worthy of special fannish attention.

[95] OTP or One True Pairing is used within fan communities to refer to a fan's romantic pairing that they are most invested in. Squee, or other variations with more e's, is used to refer to a fangirl's outpouring of feelings, usually enthusiasm and joy. See, Aja Romano, "Canon, Fanon, Shipping and More: A Glossary of the Tricky Terminology that Makes up Fan Culture, *Vox,* June 7, 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/6/7/11858680/fandom-glossary-fanfiction-explained


Illustration 3: Tweet from fan positioning #Noahlee as her new OTP (One True Pairing).

In addition, Kristen J. Warner has discussed fan shipping practices in Hulu's award winning adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Warner identifies the dread she and other women she spoke to felt surrounding the series whose themes included ritualized rape.[96] I draw on Warner's analysis of shipping in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-) to think through the ways that "shipping" practices operate in a television narrative that is built on the atrocities of violence against the protagonists. Further, the plight of the handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale* is in many ways analogous to the sexual trauma that Black women were forced to endure during slavery. In her work, Kristen Warner spaeaks to the "guilt" associated with investment in a romance in an "oppressive, dystopic, and utterly terrifying storyworld."[97] Similarly, *Underground*'s setting and story line might suggest that investment in a romantic subplot

[96] Kristen J. Warner, "JunexNick: The Quietest Ship in the Handmaid Fandom." *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 11, no. 1, 2018, 198-200.
[97] Ibid, 200.

is "frivilous" when the characters are in such grave danger; however, the Black female fans that are tweeting using #Noahlee, like Warner and the other JunexNick shippers, choose to highlight their enthusiam and joy. The differnce in *Underground,* of course, is tied to race, and the additional element of being able to see two Black characters fall in love and fight for each other in the midst of extreme circumstances.

In addition to highly visible emotionality, Black female fans associated Noah and Rosalee with famous Black power couple Jay-Z and Beyoncé. In the first iteration of their On The Run tour in 2015, Beyoncé and Jay-Z filmed a short film inspired by *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and used the scenes they filmed as a part of their sets on stage and in promotional materials.[98] When one fan used a GIF of Jay-Z and Beyoncé in black ski masks from the promotion of their joint tour and added "#UndergroundWGN #RosaleeandNoah #OnTheRun" a Black, female viewer responded saying "#NoahLee out here like!" connecting one viewer's observation to the larger conversation that was brewing around #NoahLee. Tweeted during the same broadcast of "Firefly," another user stated" #Noahlee (boy and girl pair emoji) is on the run like JayZ and Beyonce (crying laugh emoji) (heart eyes emoji) #UndergroundWGN". Jay-Z and Beyoncé were evoking imagery from a film about two lovers on the run after a heist and evading law enforcement. Black, female viewers associated them with Noah and Rosalee, and constructed parallels to the two budding lovers on the run from slave catchers after their own heist. I situate this as an example of both Florini and Miltner and Highfield's claim

[98] This wasn't the first time the couple had likened themselves to outlaws Bonnie and Clyde; in Jay-Z's 2002 album *The Blueprint: The GIFt & The Curse,* Beyoncé joins Jay-Z on his seventh studio album for track " '03 Bonnie and Clyde".

that one of the main traits of Black Twitter is Black users fluency in Black popular culture.[99]

Finally, Black female viewers consistently demonstrated that they were deeply invested in watching a Black love story prevail despite overwhelming odds. In episode six "Troubled Water," Rosalee and Noah have a large fight and one of their companions, former overseer's apprentice Cato, continues to sow discord between the two. Black female fans responded to this threat to their union with extreme worry. One Black female viewer tweeted "I would say there is trouble in paradise for #NoahLee but there's nothing paradisiac about their conditions #UndergroundWGN." In the last third of the episode, as Noah searches the boat the escaped slaves are using to travel North, he discovers that Rosalee is no longer on board with them; she has disappeared. While Noah struggles to come to grips with what appears to be Rosalee's abandonment, Cato casts doubt on Noah by telling him "That girl gave up on you." In the final scene of "Troubled Water," Rosalee and members of a Native American tribe show up on the bank of the river to save Noah, Henry, and Cato from a group of slave catchers. As the boat approaches land, Noah sees Rosalee from a distance and it dawns on him that she risked her life to swim to shore and find help. Set to executive producer John Legend's song "Made for Love," the infamous "gaze" returns as Noah realizes he was wrong to ever doubt Rosalee or their relationship. In response, Black female fans on Twitter expressed an outpouring of emotion that the couple they were rooting for had made it past a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. One Black female viewer stated "The face that @AldisHodge

[99] Florini, "Tweeps," 224; Miltner and Highfield, "GIFs,".

Noah made when he saw @jurneesmollett Rosalee on the river bank made my heart melt!! (heart eye emoji) (heart eye emoji)" and another stating "#NoahLee all day. #Black(heart) #Goals." Identifying Noah and Rosalee as Black love "goals," this fan positioned the tenacity of their relationship as aspirational. This is especially significant considering how Black women have not been understood as objects of romantic affection or worthy of sacrifice.

In the three episodes between "Troubled Water" and the season finale "The White Whale," Rosalee and Noah's safety becomes ever more tenuous. When each of them is in peril, Noah is shot in episode seven "Cradle," in desperate need of medicine in episode eight "Grave," and slave catchers eventually capture Rosalee, they remain deeply committed to each other. With the safe house within grasp, Noah risks his chance at freedom to rescue Rosalee and they both make it to the house of abolitionists operating alongside The Ohio River at the close of episode nine "Black and Blue." Black, female viewers were overjoyed when the two individuals they had been rooting for all season had seemingly made it to safety together. The ethos embedded throughout tweets from Black female viewers of Underground that used #NoahLee illustrated that Black women especially were committed to having Black love stories be represented on screen. As Warner notes "the only time Black women are discussed in the news is when they are being told they are less likely to get married than any other racialized group— or that they are the least attractive racialized group," making Black female fandom centered on

Black women's desirability or romantic lives an important practice.[100] Moreover, Black female fans of *Underground* illustrated their firm belief that despite persistent structural obstacles, Black love could prevail. The women tweeting about Rosalee and Noah were heartened that the couple could overcome such extreme roadblocks; their courage and sacrifice resonated with these viewers and offered a different representation lacking in the television landscape.[101] In addition to these fan practices performed by Black women, Black viewers' use of #WeOut illustrated some of the key ways the main tenets of Black Twitter can intersect with live-tweeting.

## #WEOUT: CREATING A HASHTAG FOR US BY US

Developed by Jordan Calhoun and editors at the popular blog *Black Nerd Problems*, #WeOut was used by members of the blerd (Black nerd) community who watched and live-tweeted the series, and then adopted by both people affiliated with the series and by other Black users as the season continued. In line with the Black Twitter enclaves created by Black users interested in intragroup discourse who live-tweeted shows like *Game of Thrones* (#DemThrones) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (#DatMurda), the Twitter users who used #WeOut wanted to cultivate group specific discourse. I posit that attempts to make a Black space in the live-tweeting community became especially important as the rules of Black Twitter provided the rhetorical tools for necessary catharsis. Though *Underground* continually blended genres in its narrative,

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[100] Warner, "Black Women's Fandom," 46.

[101] Other shows that center Black women's romantic lives and use problems within the relationship to fuel the narrative like *Insecure* and *Being Mary Jane*.

the show never shied away from many of the real horrors of enslavement. Within #WeOut, Black viewers were able to inject both humor into the viewing experience at appropriate moments, but also to have frank conversations about the historical role of white supremacy. In her analysis of Black Twitter hashtags used for live-tweeting *Vox* journalist Aja Romano argues,

> These hashtags serve multiple purposes. They provide a space for blerds and black fans on Twitter to consume popular culture without other voices intruding on the conversation. They allow for easy, informal group conversation that feels less public than other heavily trafficked hashtags. And, through the naming of the hashtags themselves, they allow Black Twitter users to celebrate a community dialect.[102]

The purposes of these hashtags that Romano identifies, especially curating space for private conversation amongst Black viewers and celebrating the linguistic functions of African-American Vernacular English, were prevalent in my analysis of uses of #WeOut during the *Underground* broadcast. Additionally, in her recent work on #DemThrones and Black enclaved fan spaces, Sarah Florini identifies many of the same motivations for using alternate hashtags as Romano but adds, "the use of these hashtags does more than deter outsiders from participating; it also marks the fan space as explicitly Black, in

[102] Aja Romano, "How a Game of Thrones Hashtag Sparked Debate Over Ownership, Linguistics, and Cultural Appropriation," *Vox,,* May 23, 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/5/23/11715748/black-twitter-demthrones-hashtag-controversy

which Blackness, not whiteness, is taken as the normative." [103] The centering of a Black fan identity is especially resonant considering that #WeOut originated with *Black Nerd Problems*, which was created as a space for Black nerds who had been alienated by the structural whiteness of geek culture.

#WeOut also functioned at multiple levels of meaning. In addition to having to be familiar with Jordan Calhoun or *Black Nerd Problems* enough to follow the accounts in the first place, users likely had to know that "we out" is used in Black vernacular to indicate that a group of people are leaving. "We out" functions as a complete sentence and through the linguistic rules of African-American Vernacular English, the verb "are" is not needed to make this complete. Secondly, as Calhoun indicates in his initial tweet (Illustration 4), "We out." (quotations included) has jokingly been attributed to Harriet Tubman. Though I had difficulty tracking down the origin of "We out. – Harriet Tubman, 1849," as a member of Black ethnic enclaves on social media platforms, I had seen the faux quote several times and knew that some Black creators began to produce and sell T-shirts with the quote. Though still heavily connected to Black creative production, when you search "we out harriet tubman" using Google, the first page of results includes Amazon and Walmart along with Black-owned screen printing companies, indicative of the ways in which Black creative production circulated on a space like Twitter can become easily coopted by businesses. #WeOut not only demonstrates some of the ways in which Black Twitter intersects with the phenomenon

[103] Sarah Florini, "Enclaving and Cultural Resonance in Black *Game of Thrones* Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 29 (2019): 3.5.

of "social TV," but also helps to illustrate some of the more humorous functions of Black Twitter that were identified by Sarah Florini and its uses as a space to disseminate counterpublic discourses.


Illustration 4: Jordan Calhoun identifying #WeOut as the Black Twitter hashtag

While live-tweeting the action packed series premiere, "The Macon 7," both Calhoun and William Evans, who was tweeting from the blog's official account, displayed several of the properties of Black Twitter discourse. In one of the first scenes, lawyer John Hawkes (Marc Blucas) stands on the steps of The Supreme Court and gives a speech about how The Constitution should protect men like Dred Scott. As the camera pans to what should be his audience, we see that the white people of Washington D.C. are uninterested in Hawkes's message. Calhoun paired a photo of John Hawkes speaking to

seemingly no one next to one of Jeb Bush from the campaign trail where he seems to be waving to a group that has their backs turned and tweeted "This is how Jeb Bush felt the whole election #UndergroundWGN #WeOut." This is clearly meant to be humorous and also mock the absurdity of the Republican primary race. His next tweet, from the same scene, takes a screen shot of William Still (Chris Chalk) approaching John Hawkes to try to convince him to open his home along The Ohio River to runaway slaves.


Illustration 5: Tweet from Jordan Calhoun using #WeOut

The humor here operates at multiple levels and is likely hidden to individuals not a part of the same cultural milieu as Calhoun and the members of the *Underground* community he sought to hail. Before Soundcloud, many budding rappers attempted to get their music heard by selling mixtapes, then later CDs, on the street in many American cities to pedestrians walking by. While most Black residents of the communities where this is prominent ignore the requests to buy a mixtape, which is more often than not absolutely terrible, white people just visiting these communities might not know better. Calhoun is

alluding to this naiveté and speaking to Black people who know the persistence many of these artists have. Further, because costuming makes it clear these men are not in the present, Calhoun is joking that even in the 19th century Black men tried to hustle people on the streets by hocking mixtapes. Lastly, his description of the mixtape as "fire" is legible to those that understand Black vernacular. These types of jokes were especially prominent in #WeOut.

In a similar vein to my previous discussion of how Black, female viewers related Rosalee and Noah to Beyoncé and Jay-Z, I was struck by how many references to other Black media products were also present in #WeOut, most notably reference to Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks*, which began as a comic strip and then became a series on Cartoon Network from 2005 to 2014. In season two of the series, Robert Freeman, or "Grandad," tells his grandchildren, Huey and Riley, a story of their ancestor Catcher Freeman, who he believes was a runaway slave turned hero.[104] Both Catcher Freeman and Tobias Freeman, who in Robert's iteration of the story represents an Uncle Tom character, get invoked in #WeOut, with one user likening Alano Miller's Cato to Tobias. Additionally, during the broadcast of "The Lord's Day," one user tweeted "Cato sits back smiling…man… #UndergroundWGN #WeOut" and includes a looped GIF from *The Boondocks* of main character Huey slapping someone (Illustration 6). Since the scene the GIF is extracted from has only Huey in the frame for the slap, the GIF plays as if Huey is slapping the audience. However, paired with the text of this tweet we see that the viewer

[104] Aaron McGruder, *The Boondocks,* "The Story of Catcher Freeman," *Cartoon Network,* January 28, 2008.

intends for it to seem like Huey Freeman is slapping Cato. To someone unfamiliar with the characters in *The Boondocks,* this tweet and GIF pairing would still make sense, but they would potentially miss an additional layer.[105] Since Huey Freeman is a young, Black radical modeled after activists and leaders like Malcom X and Fred Hampton, Huey would find Cato, who at this point in the narrative is portrayed a snake ready to betray his fellow slaves at any turn, completely objectionable. Moreover, the violence and fight scenes in *The Boondocks*, inspired by martial arts films, are highly dramatized to the point of absurdity for comedic effect. These references to *The Boondocks* are also good illustrations of Florini's assertion that "signifyin' requires participants to possess certain forms of cultural knowledge and cultural competencies,[106] but also of Miltner and Highfield's assertion that "…by selecting and applying GIFs that have specific (but unstated) meaning to certain groups, they can be used as a form of social steganography (Marwick and boyd) that enables hiding-in-plain-sight form of communication."[107] While of course not all Black viewers of *Underground* were well versed in *The Boondocks*, the series had been at the center of several in-group debates about the politics of representation and what messages we as a community were interested in disseminating to larger publics.[108]

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105 Miltner and Highfield, "GIF".
106 Florini, "Tweeps," 227.
107 Miltner and Highfield, "GIF," 7.
108 Nancy C. Cornwell and Mark P. Orbe, "Keepin' It Real and/or Sellin' Out to the Man": African-American Responses to Aaron McGruder's the Boondocks, in *Say It Loud! African-American Audiences, Media, and Identity,* ed. Robin R. Mean Coleman, (New York: Routledge, 2002): 27-45.

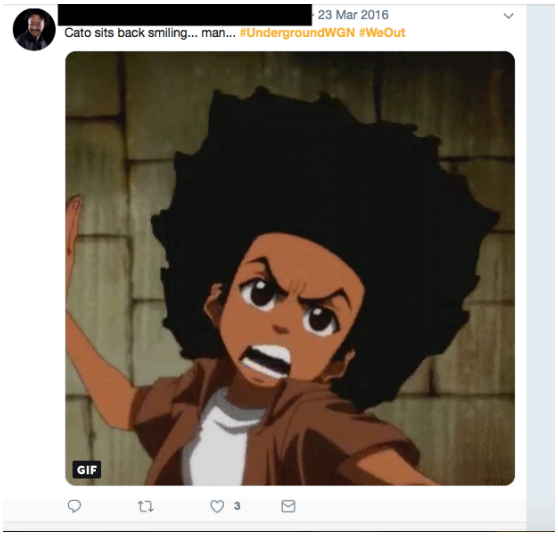


Illustration 6: Tweet using a GIF from *The Boondocks*

Most striking in my analysis of #WeOut was Black users' decision to produce and circulate counterhegemonic narratives about whiteness. Elizabeth (Jessica DeGouw) and John Hawkes are abolitionists, and in the beginning of the first season, decide to harbor runaway slaves in their home. In the first episode, however, they, especially Elizabeth, express trepidation and are fearful of the consequences of illegally helping runaway slaves. In the first few episodes, Black viewers mocked the Hawkes, then eventually came to respect them as they became more enmeshed in the abolitionist movement. From the outset, the Hawkes are set up as "good" white people in a narrative filled with white antagonists. However, fatigued, by the centrality of white saviors in slave narratives and with the ways in which The Hawkes seemed to symbolize a passive white liberalism, Black viewers made fun of them by referring to them in terms like "Mediocre White Abolitionists." While labeling them as mediocre is partially meant in jest, it

attempts to draw attention to how small actions made by well meaning white people, have been lauded as extraordinary while people of color, especially Black people, make much more significant sacrifices in racial justice movements. As the narrative progressed, however, and it became increasingly clear that John and Elizabeth were willing to risk their lives to help enslaved people trying to escape bondage, viewers tweeting using #WeOut stopped mocking them and eventually began paying them compliments. Additionally, Black viewers used #WeOut to discuss how the sinister actions of white characters could be seen in the present, explicitly counter to understandings of racism as a part of the past. During episode seven "Cradle," one user tweeted "This is what happens when you crush white feelings. Lil' snitch. White fragility carries on to adulthood. #UndergroundWGN #WeOut." (Illustration 7)


Illustration 7: Examples of tweets critiquing whiteness

Aja Romano's assertion that Black Twitter developed hashtags allow Black viewers to discuss their consumption of the narrative without the eyes of the wider audience can help explain the prevalence of discussions of white people. To be clear, discussions of

whiteness existed outside of the enclave created by #WeOut and the majority of the tweets using the hashtag made no mention of the white characters at all. However, I argue that cataloging how Black viewers communicated about whiteness on this hashtag was significant because from the first episode the creators of this hashtag explicitly defined it as a Black space, while #BreakFree, #UndergroundWGN, and #RiseUp were for the use of all *Underground* viewers.

### SOCIAL TV AND INDUSTRY PARTICIPATION

*Underground* incorporated calls for live-tweeting in its promotion of each new episode. *Underground's* social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, and of course Twitter) shared images created by the production team that featured panels of the characters whose story lines would be most prominent, the time of the broadcast, and the show's official hashtag (Illustration 8). Though several viewers would have participated in the Twitter community and watched the show while it aired regardless of specific promotion efforts, it is telling that *Underground*'s team spent time and resources to cultivate a community on social media platforms, especially Twitter.


Illustration 8: Example of official promotional image urging viewers to live-tweet

In her analysis of social TV and ABC's TGIT programming block, Eleanor Patterson explains the various factors that led to the success of Shonda Rhimes's block of Thursday night programming. She argues,

> the integration of social media into television programming is not some organic response to Twitter's popularity but rather the result of the television industry's ongoing incorporation of digital platforms into increasing audience commodification strategies and the specific work of Twitter's media department to encourage Twitter integration into network programming.[109]

As I have briefly mentioned in this chapter, several of the viewers who live-tweeted the broadcast of *Underground* interacted with both the show's official Twitter account and

[109] Patterson, "TGIT," 3.5.

various members of the cast. Many cast members, producers, and writers likely enjoyed live-tweeting with the audience during the broadcast. However, for the purposes of my analysis, it is imperative to remember that these industrial agents were tasked with curating a viewing community on Twitter to help drive up audience numbers during the live broadcast. In fact, two of the hashtags I have explained in depth here, #NoahLee and #WeOut, were adopted and used by multiple cast members, co-creator and writer Misha Green, and the official *Underground* Twitter account, which I include here to illustrate how those affiliated sought to create community with regular viewers and encourage usage of hashtags that could be engaged with while watching live.

In this chapter, I have used the community of Black viewers that formed around *Underground* to illustrate how racial identities are communicated online around a television series and how the specific properties of Twitter structure specific types of communication. Additionally, using gender as a critical axis of inquiry, I apply literature on Black female media consumers to the Black women who demonstrated investment in the Black love stories between the two main characters of *Underground.* The rise in second-screen viewing and Twitter's partnership with several television broadcast networks and streaming platforms means that television is becoming more and more integrated with new media technologies. In the next chapter, I build on this analysis to sketch out how those affiliated with the show cultivated the viewing community around *Underground,* how they adopted the practices of fans of the series, and lastly, how they used Twitter as an intermediary to encourage certain readings of the text.

## CHAPTER THREE: Occupation vs. Resistance: Constructing a Participatory Climate Around a "Thrilling" Slave Narrative

"If I knew what I knew in the past
I would've been blacked out on your ass"
-Kanye West, "Black Skinhead"

"We've heard about the occupation and I think now it's time for us to see what the revolution was" – Misha Green, Creator/Writer/Executive Producer

*  *  *

In WGN America's first trailer for their series *Underground* they set a distinct tone. The trailer begins with a cut from the opening scene of the first episode, where the intense percussion of Kanye West's 2013 single "Black Skinhead" immediately hooks in viewers. A shaky cam, upside down before it rights itself, follows main character Noah (Aldis Hodge) as he is being chased through the woods at night, with presumably a slave catcher on his heels. If WGN America only had twenty seconds to make a pitch, for *Underground* they made a bold choice. With executive producer John Legend at the helm, *Underground* used contemporary music to distinct ends. The jarring anachronism sets the tone for the entire series. As Regina Bradley notes in her analysis of uses of hip-hop in on-screen depictions of slavery,

> hip-hop serves as an entry point for witnessing the horrors and complexities of enslaved black persons trying to maneuver the white supremacist power structures historically documented in the American imagination while plotting their own sense of freedom and agency. In essence, the sonic elements of hip-hop — both

> rappers' voices as well as their instrumental accompaniments — are used to validate the traumatic lives of enslaved blacks.[110]

Beginning with West's bombastic hit and using the percussion to transition to Vo Williams's "Light 'Em Up," the trailer for *Underground* quickly illustrates Misha Green and Joe Pokaski's (creators/writers/executive producers) intentions for the series, which included "updating" the story of enslavement and centering the perspectives of slaves; the trailer immediately set *Underground* apart from previous iterations of slave narratives.

Similarly, in a "First Look" video available on *Underground*'s YouTube channel and subsequently shared on social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, the cast, creators, and producers position *Underground* as a rollicking thrill ride that will keep audiences on the edges of their seats and defy expectations.[111] This framing of *Underground* followed the series throughout its first season; first, solely through those affiliated with the show, then quickly adopted by members of the viewing community on Twitter. The initial interviews available make it clear that those affiliated with the show sought to counter what they saw as slavery fatigue; Aldis Hodge, Alano Miller, and John Legend all repeated that though audiences might believe they were already familiar with this narrative, *Underground* was distinct and imbued with a fresh, new perspective. To return to Joshua Alston's review of the first season, "slave narratives often feel like punishment… that put WGN's America's *Underground* in a precarious position of asking

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[110] Regina Bradley, "Re-Imaging Slavery and the Hip-Hop Imagination," *South: A Scholarly Journal* 49, 1 (2016): 5.

[111] *Underground* cast and producers, *WGN America's Underground "First Look",* YouTube Video, 3:51, January 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Elm1kWw16RU

viewers to pay weekly visits to a period many would soon rather avoid entirely."[112] By positioning *Underground* as markedly different, they attempted to construct specific audience expectations. In addition to Alston, critics in a variety of outlets including *The Washington Post*, *New York Magazine*, and *The Atlantic* picked up the meanings those affiliated with the show sought to promulgate, with critics affirming that *Underground* was a heist thriller meant to keep audiences on the edge of their seats and not a somber slog. Throughout the history of American cultural production, especially film and television, critics have acted as important intermediaries in the audience's production of meaning. Though the opinions of critics do still carry cultural weight, I argue that with the rise of "social TV," series' social media engagement and the ability of Twitter to collapse space between viewers of a show and those that make it, industrial agents can more directly influence the meaning-making processes of viewers.

Trailers, interviews, and behind the scenes clips have long been par for the course in creating hype around a series. While these types of promotion still exist, the adoption of new media technologies by networks seeking to promote content across platforms in ways that might entice viewers to watch live also means that both promotional strategies have adapted to a new media landscape. Building on Jonathan Gray's work on media paratexts, I posit that in addition to the more traditional trailers and behind the scenes interviews, the Twitter activity generated by those affiliated with *Underground* act as important media paratexts worthy of critical attention. Further, Gray notes paratexts

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[112] Joshua Alston, "WGN America's Underground is a Taut Thriller Disguised as a History Lesson," *The A.V. Club*, https://tv.avclub.com/wgn-america-s-underground-is-a-taut-thriller-disguised-1798186867

extend beyond pretexts designed to create hype. Paratexts can take forms that in the case of television (re)structure reception as the series is airing.[113] While the trailer and first look videos I briefly mention exist as typical "entryway paratexts," or those that "grab the viewer before he or she reaches the text and try to control the viewer's entrance to the text," this chapter is primarily concerned with what Gray refers to as in media res paratexts, which "flow between the gaps of textual exhibition…working to police certain reading strategies in media res."[114] I position the tweets that I examine here from individuals affiliated with show as media paratexts to illustrate how they worked to create meaning around *Underground* and disseminate sanctioned understandings of certain themes to a highly active and engaged audience on Twitter.

Through an analysis of the tweets of creators/writers/executive producers Misha Green and Joe Pokaski, executive producer John Legend, and stars Jurnee Smollett-Bell and Aldis Hodge, I illustrate how promotional labor can take shape on Twitter and how they used the platform to "show their work," giving viewers a behind the scenes look at how the production came together and demonstrating the amount of research it took to do justice to a complex and historically misrepresented story. Lastly, and most central to this chapter, I illustrate how tweets from those affiliated with *Underground* are not just add-ons, but like the paratexts that Gray analyzes in his work these tweets, "construct, live in, and affect the running" of the series.[115]

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[113] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 11.
[114] Ibid, 23.
[115] Ibid, 6.

Using Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) I examine every tweet with an explicit reference to the series generated by Pokaski (@JoePokaski), Green (@MishaGreen), Legend (@johnlegend), and Smollett-Bell (@jurneesmollett) and Hodge (@AldisHodge) from March 9-May 11 2016, the series premiere to the season finale. CTDA extends traditional critical discourse analysis to take into account the ways in which the affordances and limitations of a communication technology or platform structure discourses.[116] The tweets I analyze here fall into three categories and illustrate some of the main themes I wish to expound upon. First, I discuss the promotional labor that took place on Twitter and discuss how some of those affiliated with the show engaged in the same live-tweeting practices as Black viewers, which at times demonstrated a fluency in the conventions of Black Twitter and live-tweeting ethnic enclaves. Additionally, I examine tweets that illustrate the behind the scenes work that went into creating the series, especially those that highlight the caliber of the team behind the series. Finally, I analyze the tweets of the cast, writers, and producers as in media res paratexts produced to construct meaning around *Underground.* I focus on these three themes because after collecting and examining the tweets from the five individuals I survey in this chapter, these themes were the most prominent.

While this project is centrally concerned with a single season of one series, this case study can demonstrate how *Underground*'s curation illustrates the symbiotic relationship emerging between Twitter and television. As Myles McNutt argues in his introduction to

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[116] André Brock, "From the Black Hand Side: Twitter as Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012).

a special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* on social TV, "while there are now platforms that promise easy connection between viewer and producer, the terms of that connection are undefined, constantly renegotiated as both sides explore the possibilities embedded in spaces like Twitter and Tumblr."[117] This chapter examines this negotiation between viewer and producer to demonstrate how the individuals behind *Underground* attempted to capitalize on the new affordances of social TV.[118]

## WHO'S RUNNING WITH US?: PLATFORM AFFORDANCES AND SOCIAL TV

By the series premiere, *Underground* had learned from its successful television predecessors. The show's social media strategy heavily encouraged social media engagement and audience participation. From the first episode, almost every person whose Twitter accounts I survey for this chapter constructed a tweet in the lead up to the broadcast that included the official promotional photo generated for each week's episode that encouraged viewers to live-tweet with the cast, included the handle of the official Twitter account, the show's primary official hashtag, and five character photos which changed every week based on whose story lines would be the most prominent. Learning from the success of ABC and #TGIT, *Underground* framed live television viewing as an event that was not to be missed. In her analysis of #TGIT and ABC's block of social TV, Eleanor Patterson asserts "social television reframes TV as a communal coviewing event where discussion and exchange through platforms like Twitter create connection amongst

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[117] Myles McNutt "Social TV Fandom and the Media Industries, *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 26 (2018): 2.4.

[118] For more on early Social TV see, Konstantinos Chorianopolous and George Lekakos, "Introduction to Social TV: Enhancing the Shared Experience with Interactive TV," *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 24, no. 2 (2008).

geographically dispersed audience members."[119] Notably, because WGN America was a little known network with a rather meager audience in comparison to its neighbors on cable, some of the first tweets from the Twitter timelines I examined urged viewers to be sure to look up which channel the network was on before the show started, even linking to channel finders. Despite the common mission of all of the individuals I survey here, their timelines and both their levels and modes of engagement differed, especially along gender lines.


Illustration 9: John Legend and Jurnee Smollett-Bell tweet promotional photos

Jurnee Smollett-Bell, Aldis Hodge, and Misha Green, all younger than Pokaski and Legend, demonstrated much more advanced literacies of the platform. They were able to speak to many audience members in their own language, be that through GIFs, emojis, or

[119] Eleanor Patterson, "Must Tweet TV: ABC's TGIT and the Cultural Work of Programming Social Television," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 26 (2018): 1.5.

creating new, fun hashtags to broaden participation.[120] In addition to the variation in the types of tweets they generated and how they used the medium, there were vast disparities in the sheer number of tweets from these individuals. Since Jurnee Smollett-Bell and Aldis Hodge, as the stars, acted as the face of the series, it is not an anomaly that they would outpace their producers in the number of tweets they generated, especially considering that many of the things they responded to during live-tweets were things that happened to their specific characters. However, Jurnee Smollett-Bell did produce drastically more tweets than Aldis Hodge. Further, Misha Green and Joe Pokaski also demonstrate a gendered divide in output. Though it was a collective project to encourage audience participation and live television viewing to cement the new series as a part of WGN America's lineup, this "collective labor" disproportionately fell on women (Smollett-Bell and Green). While an analysis of the tweets both Smollett-Bell and Green produced throughout the season as well as videos they uploaded to Instagram and Twitter illustrate that live-tweeting and promotional social media labor apparently was quite joyous for both of them, it is still worth noting that they were significantly more active. Further, I do not mean to suggest a causal link between gender and age and social media activity/labor, merely that specific patterns emerged. In fact, cast member Alano Miller, who played Cato, would potentially exist as an example of a male who was heavily involved in the Twitter community. However, all but seven of his tweets have been deleted from his timeline, speaking to the ephemeral nature of digital media platforms.

[120] Ages at the time of the series premiere: Green: 31, Smollett-Bell: 29, Hodge: 29, Legend: 38, I was unable to find Joe Pokaski's exact age, but can estimate that he is in his 40s.

One of the most interesting key differences in how Misha Green, Aldis Hodge, and Jurnee Smollett-Bell encouraged viewers to live-tweet was their increased use of some of the affordances of the platform like GIFs, emojis, and creating new hashtags. Similar to the viewers I surveyed in the previous chapter, Hodge, Green, and Smollett-Bell were well versed both in the genre conventions of Black Twitter, and also uniquely understood how the affordances of Twitter pair well with liveness and creating energy around watching a series when it aired. For example, in the tweet pictured below, Aldis Hodge uses a reaction GIF from the film *Friday* (1995) to respond to an antagonistic scene between his character Noah and Cato during the second episode "War Chest" (Illustration 10).


Illustration 10: Aldis Hodge tweet using a GIF from *Friday*

In her analysis of signifyin' and Black Twitter, Sarah Florini identifies the main tenets of the platform's ethnic enclave, noting users' communication of shared cultural knowledge

and dexterous use of language.[121] As I have previously discussed, live-tweeting frequently takes advantage of Twitter's ever growing GIF repository to convey reactions to scenes. Hodge's tweet is in line with Miltner and Highfield and Florini's analyses; by using a GIF from the film *Friday*, Hodge is demonstrating his familiarity with the Black film canon and his use of Black vernacular signals his own subject positioning while speaking to specific audiences.

One of the more interesting findings in my analysis, is how those affiliated with the show mimicked the live-tweeting practices of viewers of the show. Similar to Hodge, Smollett-Bell and Green used some of the affordances of the platform in ways that modeled more intense modes of engagement. As discussed in the previous chapter, after a fan created the portmanteau NoahLee (Noah and Rosalee) to discuss the romantic subplot between the two main characters, Jurnee Smollett-Bell immediately responded to the user and encouraged her co-star to use it as well. When combing through tweets using #NoahLee, I immediately found several from Green and Smollett-Bell who were conversing with viewers, almost exclusively female, about the connection between the two characters. Further, as episodes continued and they identified patterns among the viewing community, Green especially began to create new hashtags to generate conversations. For example, Green repeatedly used #gazegame to reference the long charged gazes between characters Noah and Rosalee. Though the *Underground* audience

[121] Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF," *Social Media and Society* 3, no.3 (2017); Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on Black Twitter," *Television and New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014): 224.

did not heavily use this hashtag during episode live-tweets, it does demonstrate that Green was more invested in generating new activity from the community and that she had picked up on viewers' investment in the romantic subplot between the two main characters.

Through their use of Black colloquialisms and African-American Vernacular English, as well as their performance of fandom, Smollett-Bell, Green, and Hodge constructed space for specific types of fan engagement and seamlessly went back and forth between tweeting as their official identity as a part of the series and performing the role of an active and engaged viewer without knowledge of how the plot would develop. Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd have theorized frameworks for understanding this slippage. Building on the symbolic interactionist framework of Erving Goffman, they use the term affiliation to note "the process of publicly performing a connection between practitioners and fans using language, words, cultural symbols, and conventions."[122] For example, in Illustration 11, which is featured below, we see Jurnee Smollett-Bell tweet "Oh nawwww y'all Noah is shot!!!!!!!! Wth!? (stressed yelling emoji) #Underground WGN" and includes a GIF of Johnny Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-) franchise. In this episode slave catchers attack the group when they are seeking refuge with a nearby Native American tribe. They narrowly escape; though, Henry is killed and Noah is badly injured. When they meet the next group of abolitionists who take them to a safe house they are transported in coffins. After tweeting

[122] Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, "To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter," *Convergence* 17, no. 2, (2011): 147.

about Noah being shot, Jurnee Smollett-Bell provides viewers who are live-tweeting with the broadcast a personal behind the scenes moment. She tweets, "I HATE COFFINS! They put me in that ish over and over too #UndergroundWGN #rosalee" and includes a live GIF of the coffin door closing while she is inside. This example illustrates the way Smollett-Bell quickly transitions between performing as a viewer and reacting to the narrative along with viewers, though she of course already knows how it unfolds, and then switching to performing as an actor of the series and giving dedicated viewers a look behind the scenes.


Illustration 11: Jurnee Smollet-Bell tweets performing insider knowledge and performing as the unknowing audience

Similarly, the slippage between performing as a star of a text and a fan of a text has also been noted by fan scholars who have studied Orlando Jones and his performance of fandom through live-tweeting *Sleepy Hollow,* of which he was a regular cast member,

and *Supernatural*.[123] In her analysis of Orlando Jones's Twitter presence, Suzanne Scott asserts, "lines between affective, transformational, and promotional labor break down in the digital space."[124] In line with Orlando Jones's live-tweeting of *Sleepy Hollow* episodes, Smollett-Bell and Hodge especially quickly transitioned back and forth between sharing behind the scenes anecdotes, expressing to viewers that they were on the edge of their seats, and responding to points in the narrative as if they were viewing episodes for the first time. Their seamless back and forth between performing as a part of the show on the platform and then performing as a regular viewer or fan integrated them into *Underground*'s Twitter community and created a sense of intimacy with those watching the show every week and participating in the Twitter conversation.

## ARTISTRY AND AUTHENTICITY: ILLUSTRATING THE WORK BEHIND *UNDERGROUND*

In his discussion of how discourses of quality television continually elide Black-cast series, Alfred L. Martin examines how *Underground* existed as "a rare industrial case," when series like *Queen Sugar* (OWN, 2016-) and *Being Mary Jane* (BET, 2013-2019), other new Black-cast dramas, were not considered quality, but rather melodrama or soap opera.[125] In their work *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status,* Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine illustrate how discourses of quality on

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123 Suzanne Scott, "The Powers that Squee: Orlando Jones and Intersectional Fan Studies," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World,* 2nd Edition, ed. Jonathan Gray, C. Lee Harrington, and Cornel Sandvoss, (New York: New York University Press, 2017).
124 Ibid, 391.
125 Alfred L. Martin, "Notes from Underground: WGN's Quality Black-Cast Experiment," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* May 31, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/notes-from-underground-wgns-black-cast-quality-tv-experiment/#!

primetime serials also rely on distancing from the soap opera.[126] As Newman and Levine discuss, the seriality that has characterized day-time soap operas since they began on radio in the 1930s is masculinized for convergence era quality TV.[127] Assigning the label of soap opera or melodrama is a discursive tool to position a serialized drama as outside of the purview of quality TV, and as Martin notes, this continually happens to Black-cast dramas. In addition to seriality, quality TV has been linked to narrative complexity, cinematography, and positioning the showrunner as an auteur and sole author.[128]

In an analysis of the entryway paratexts that were intended to create a conceptual frame for audiences and critics (in this case press releases), Martin demonstrated how WGN America sought to position *Underground* within the quality television framework. To extend Martin's analysis, I consider tweets whose content attributed elements of the "quality" schema to *Underground*. I specifically look at discussions of the caliber of both the above and below the line teams and their attention to detail and also the amount of research that both Green and Pokaski and the cast conducted to make sure the show was authentic and that they did justice to the stories of the enslaved. As both Gray and Martin contend, entryway paratexts, be they trailers, press releases, or interviews, in addition to creating hype or buzz, are intended to position the audience to receive the text in a specific way.[129] The press releases from WGN America and Sony Pictures

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[126] Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status,* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
[127] Ibid*,* 82.
[128] Also see, Jason Mittel, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling,* (New York: NYU Press, 2015).
[129] Gray, *Paratexts.* Martin, "Underground and Quality TV".

Television that Martin reviews for his analysis make it clear that *Underground* was going after the elusive label of quality. However, because quality is generally reserved for shows that center white people, I suggest that *Underground*'s team also used Twitter to bolster their claim to the quality discourse.

From the first episode, it becomes immediately clear that *Underground*'s cinematography is top notch. When attempting to define what makes a series quality, Martin notes "we [the audience] know quality when we see it," and contends that like many other nebulous concepts it is most easily defined by what it is not.[130] Despite the inherent vagueness in this understanding, Martin points out that there are a few elements that can be pinned down, one of which is the use of a single camera vs. a multi-camera set up. Since *Underground* is a period drama and the camera(s) are tasked with following the main characters as they race through the woods evading slave catchers for several episodes, a multi-camera set up was never a consideration. However, since most Black casts have been relegated to sitcoms, audiences are used to seeing Blackness depicted in a specific way on screen.

In the series premiere "The Macon 7," the two opening scenes have the camera moving rapidly to keep up with our protagonists as they run through thick woods and the plantation house. When a viewer asked about Jurnee Smollett-Bell's first scene where she runs through ornate hallways in a beautiful dress and white apron, Smollett-Bell tells that viewer "Amazing right? Done on a drone in one continuous take. Thank our amazing

[130] Ibid.

Dir @shinybootz and DP #KevinMcKnight." Smollett-Bell was not the only one to highlight the work of the Director of Photography.

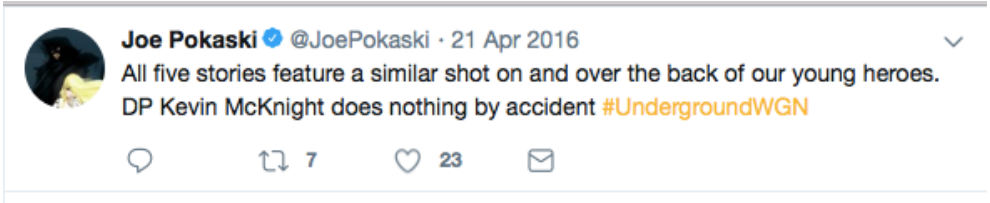


Illustration 12: Tweet from Joe Pokaski complimenting DP Kevin McKnight

In the tweet pictured in Illustration 12 from series creators Joe Pokaski, he illustrates McKnight's attention to detail. This sentiment was tweeted during the broadcast of the seventh episode, "Cradle," which was chiefly concerned with the effects of a system of enslavement on children. The episode follows all of the main young characters from six-year old James, who at the start of the episode has to go work in the field for the first time, to teenage Henry who is attempting to define himself while on the run with The Macon 7. In his tweet, Pokaski highlights a detail that many viewers likely missed as the episode weaves back and forth between all of the characters at the episode's center. By drawing attention to McKnight's skill as a cinematographer and the planning that went into all of the shots for the series, Pokaski is reifying the elements of quality in *Underground*.

In addition to the camera work, the actors and producers were likely to comment on the skill of the actors in the series. Adding behind the scenes insider knowledge to a chilling scene in episode four, "Firefly," in which August Pullman (Chris Meloni) first

interacts with head house slave Ernestine (Amirah Vann), Pokaski notes "@Chris_Meloni wiping his knife on Ernestine's apron. I WISH that was in the script. That's all him. Feeding the bad wolf. #UndergroundWGN." I argue this also fits in with *Underground*'s desire to position the show as quality television. Meloni, an Emmy nominee, was the most well known actor on the series and this tweet is intended to highlight his craftsmanship. The addition of "feeding the bad wolf" displays Meloni's deep understanding of his character, so much so, that he could improvise an action and it fit seamlessly with the writers' vision for the character. Further, the positioning Meloni as talented enough to improvise, reengages discourses of quality, which have been linked to acting as well as narrative complexity and aesthetics. Further, critics who reviewed the series repeatedly commented on the caliber of the performances, and Scott Feinburg at *The Hollywood Reporter* identified Meloni, along with Smollett-Bell and Hodge, as a possibility for Emmy consideration for his performance in the first season.[131]

In addition to highlighting both performances and technical accomplishments, those affiliated with *Underground* further located the series within discourses of quality and authenticity by focusing on the amount of research the writers and cast conducted to prepare for the series. For series like *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), referred to by many critics as a hallmark of the most recent "Golden Age of TV,"[132] verisimilitude was key.[133]

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[131] Scott Feinberg, "Feinberg Forecast: Emmy Predictions (6/3/16)," *The Hollywood Reporter,* June 3, 2016, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/emmys-2016-predictions-feinberg-forecast-897463/item/best-drama-series-feinberg-forecast-897446

[132] See Emily VanDerWerff, "The Golden Age of TV is Dead; Long Live the Golden Age of TV," *The A.V. Club,* September 201, 2013, https://tv.avclub.com/the-golden-age-of-tv-is-dead-long-live-the-golden-age-1798240704; Matt Brennan, "The Golden Age of Television is Officially Over," *Paste Magazine,* May 31, 2018, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2018/05/the-golden-age-of-television-is-officially-

Creator Matthew Weiner's laser sharp focus on recreating the 1960s was the subject of many of the paratexts that surrounded the show and help construct its positioning as quality television. This includes the press kits the series sent out to reviewers, which, as entryway paratexts, positioned the show within a framework of elevated television.[134] Authenticity, as a discursive frame, works in particular ways for period dramas, and Weiner's insistence on recreating the decade *Mad Men* takes place in became adopted in discourses of the series' quality.

The tweets I analyze here from the cast and creators were also in some ways concerned with authenticity. However, to contrast to a series like *Mad Men*, this was paired with the additional consideration that enslaved people had been so frequently depicted without agency. While Weiner was adamant about each detail fitting the aesthetic of the time period, *Underground* wanted to entice viewers by infusing the narrative with contemporary elements. In promotional interviews released before the series aired, cast members described the experience of reading first person slave narratives and filming in preserved slave quarters at Louisiana State University. This same thread was picked up during episode live-tweets. In sharing behind the scenes information with dedicated viewers who followed along on Twitter, those affiliated with the show could illustrate the amount of planning and work that went into imbuing the fictional narrative with authenticity in ways that would make clear the terrifying

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over.html; Sonia Saraiya, "'Mad Men' at 10: The Last great Drama of TV's Golden Age," *Variety,* July 18, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/tv/columns/mad-men-turns-10-tv-last-great-drama-1202497573/

[133] Chloe Gilke, "Casting the Men in the Gray Flannel Suits: Mad Men and the Practices of Authoring TV History," (MA Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 72.

[134] Ibid.

conditions enslaved people navigated both on the plantation and while on the run. For example, episode six, "Troubled Water," begins with the remaining members of The Macon 7 arguing over Henry's (a teenager in the series) botched attempt to steal food from a local farmer, which could have likely sent all of them back into bondage if he had been caught. During the broadcast of this episode, Misha Green tweeted "Runaways would often be recaptured or return to the plantation because of starvation. #History #UndergroundWGN." By tweeting historical facts and including #History, Misha Green continually illustrated that she had done an immense amount of research to prepare for writing the series, and that in writing *Underground*, she and Joe Pokaski took the responsibility of rendering these stories seriously.


Illustration 13: Misha Green providing historical background on Twitter

In Illustration 13, we can see another instance of Green discussing the history of The Underground Railroad. Not only does she explain a piece of history that many viewers likely had not learned in schools, she also includes a hashtag (#anymeans) to illustrate the grit and determination of abolitionist who worked as a part of The Underground Railroad.

"Any means" is a reference to Malcolm X and connects the abolitionists operating in 1857 (the year *Underground* is set) to the work of Black radical activists a century later. Assessed in concert with some of the other paratexts surrounding the show, especially cast interviews from before *Underground*'s premiere, the importance of historical research becomes apparent in the mission of the series.[135] By communicating these details about production of the series both in interviews and on Twitter, the cast and creators made their investment in the series clear and demonstrated that Twitter as a platform exists as an important intermediary where the production of meaning around a series takes place.

## IT'S NOT ABOUT THE OCCUPATION, IT'S ABOUT THE REVOLUTION: IN MEDIA RES PARATEXTS AND THE CREATION OF MEANING

Former television editor and critic at *Paste Magazine*, Shannon M. Houston reviewed every episode of *Underground* before it was eventually cancelled. However, perhaps reviewed is the wrong term. At once review, recap, history lesson, and testimony, Shannon M. Houston's analysis of each episode was highly regarded by the cast and creators of the show. They frequently praised her work on Twitter and retweeted her articles to thank her for "getting it." Houston's review of the pilot episode is worth quoting at length here to illustrate how her social location as a Black woman and

[135] See WGN America's "Ask Underground" series on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLxV_2J_-oJbZAdZChkRM12xuVy8WZ7zGx

specifically the daughter of an African-American history professor influenced her reading of the text. Houston writes,

> So this is one of those rare times when I actually find myself too close to the material to view it properly. I watch *Underground* not just as a TV-lover and TV critic, not just as a descendant of the types of characters at the center of the narrative, but as a daughter still grieving my mother and the lessons she taught me. *Underground* is precisely the kind of series my mother would have watched with me, and its mere existence reminds me of my great loss. *Oh, if Mom were here she'd be fact-checking the hell out of this premiere*, I thought last night. And no, she probably wouldn't approve of the Kanye West-infused soundtrack, though I'd have done my damndest to convert her.
>
> Now, all that being said, I still have a job to do. I *must* write about this incredible show. Let's begin with a brief recap of the season opener, "The Macon 7": *A birth. A party. A funeral. A beating. A baby thrown out with the bath water. A little boy holding out his hands for a beating. A young woman sacrificing her wrists for her brother; or, flesh for flesh. A little boy fanning white women at the party. A savior, a sadistic captor. Birth, party, funeral, plotting, planning, whispering, limping, but most of all blood. Blood and flesh for freedom* (emphasis original).[136]

[136] Shannon M. Houston, "Blood on the Leaves: Black Flesh and American Freedom in the Underground Premiere," *Paste Magazine,* March 10, 2016, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/03/blood-on-the-leaves-black-flesh-and-american-freed.html

In Houston's reviews of the series, it's quite clear that she understood the intentions of the creators, directors, and producers. *Underground* was concerned with the stakes of achieving freedom. One of the guiding questions that the creators/writers sought to thread throughout the narrative was: what would you do to break free? In her reviews, which again were frequently shared on Twitter by those affiliated with the show, Houston noted that the writers never shied away from what life under the terrifying system of slavery was truly like. However, instead of delving into "trauma porn," and solely focusing on the immense pain of those who were enslaved, Green and Pokaski were intent on showcasing their agency and ingenuity.

In the paratexts I surveyed for this project, the people behind *Underground* made it clear again and again that they wanted the audience to understand the characters as American heroes. In the "First Look" preview of the series available on *Underground*'s official YouTube page, Joe Pokaski states that the characters of *Underground* are "the Justice League of their time."[137] On May 4th during the broadcast of episode nine "Black and Blue," Pokaski tweeted "Rosalee steps back into the big house. Not the same woman. 'The Hero's Journey', #undergroundwgn style. Tripping on Devil's Snare." One of *Underground's* central aims was to relocate heroism to center enslaved Black Americans. In line with their focus on heroism and agency, Misha Green frequently repeated the refrain "it's not about the occupation, but the revolution." While this framing of the series was prevalent in the promotional rollout of the series, primarily

[137] *Underground* cast and producers, WGN America's Underground "First Look", YouTube Video, 3:51, January 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Elm1kWw16RU

delivered through cast and producer interviews, Green repeated it on Twitter in her response to a viewer praising the framing of the series (Illustration 14). Viewing her tweet pictured below through the lens of the show's paratexts makes it clear what types of understandings those affiliated with the show were interested in audiences grasping.

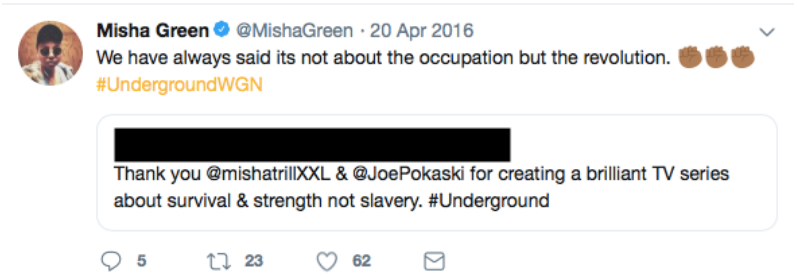


Illustration 14: Misha Green using Twitter to position *Underground* as different than previous slave narratives

The tweet has quite a few layers. The original viewer she is responding to states that *Underground* is about "survival & strength not slavery." This viewer created a dichotomy between strength or survival and slavery, positioning them as if they were incompatible. This assertion speaks to viewers' concerns that *Underground* would follow previous on-screen depictions of slavery that denied the agency and the resistance efforts of those who were enslaved and delved in to either "trauma porn" or were constructed in ways to appeal to white viewers. Further, because Misha Green responded to this tweet affirming the viewer's statement, this tweet is an example of a sanctioned understanding of the text. Green responded to relatively few viewers, and when she did, she used the quote tweet function, which positions the original tweet underneath the

response. Returning to Jonathan Gray's formulation of in media res paratexts, Green's response illustrates to both those viewing the show and anyone who comes across her tweet what *Underground* is supposed to represent.

Lastly, the cast, creators/writers, and producers wanted viewers to draw connections between the fictionalized events in the narrative and the current socio-political moment. 2016 was a tumultuous year both politically and socially. The race for the Republican nomination was underway, and at the time of *Underground*'s first season Donald Trump continued to lead in the polls. Additionally, after the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, among many other unarmed Black citizens killed by law enforcement, parts of the country were still engaging in tense and long discussions about violence against Black Americans. Throughout the first season, several viewers made connections between what was happening on *Underground* in 1857 and what was happening off screen in 2016. In the series premiere after Elizabeth, a white northerner who becomes an abolitionist, is forced to grapple with the lives of enslaved children after she visits the Macon Plantation for her niece's birthday she tell her husband that this isn't the type of world she wants to bring children into.[138] When a viewer quoted Elizabeth in her tweet and declared that the "same sentiment stands for 2016," Jurnee Smollett-Bell replied "Ain't much changed unfortunately." Smollett-Bell made similar statements on her Twitter feed throughout the airing of the first season, continually connecting the horrors inflicted on enslaved people to the systematic oppression that still plagues Black communities in America. Smollett-Bell was not the only person to use their Twitter

[138]Misha Green and Joe Pokaski, "The Macon 7," *Underground,* WGN American. March 9, 2016.

accounts to make these connections. Tom Macon, owner of the Macon plantation where most of the main characters are enslaved, is running for senator of Georgia throughout most of the first season and is seeking the backing of the neighboring rich plantation owners. During the broadcast of episode eight, "Grave," in which Tom hosts a campaign rally on the Macon plantation, Pokaski tweeted "1857. Senators were selected by powerful men, voters minimized, w/ no restraint on the corruption of money. Sound familiar? #UndergroundWGN." Pokaski's tweet makes quite a few connections between 1857 and 2016. In a presidential election cycle where a woman was almost sure to be the Democratic nominee for president for the first time and was facing rampant sexism, when her challenger in the Democratic primary made campaign finance reform a central part of his platform, and when voters would cast their ballots without the full protections of The Voting Rights Act for the first time in decades, Pokaski and many viewers saw America sliding backwards to the patently unfair election system that was responsible for a white herrenvolk democracy.

These tweets operated as paratexts deployed to continually create threads between *Underground*'s setting in 1857 and the present day when *Underground* was airing. These connections were immensely important to the entire framing of the show. To return to Joshua Alston's conception of *Underground's* inherent challenge in making a show about slavery, those affiliated with the show wanted to make the series feel more relevant by always connecting *Underground* to the present. Slavery worked to institutionalize white patriarchal rule in ways that are still embedded in American institutions, from public housing to prisons. *Underground* was interested in "updating" the narrative on-screen

through the incorporation of slick editing, genre fusion, and adding a contemporary soundtrack. Off-screen this "contemporizing" took place on Twitter. Through an analysis of the central themes I identified in the social media activity of Green, Pokaski, Smollett-Bell, Hodge, and Legend, I have illustrated how Twitter can be utilized by a television show to directly influence audiences' meaning-making practices. While viewers of *Underground* processed the traumatic events happening on-screen, they connected them to a long lineage of Black subjugation and some of the traumas that Black Americans regularly face in America today. It is also fitting that Twitter became the site for these connections as it has also become the primary social media platform where activists have mobilized against police killings and the routine violence and surveillance Black communities have been subjected to. Activists' documentation of these injustices have been made visible to wider publics through the platform, especially its affordances of hashtags and video.[139] The repeated facilitation of these connections for viewers illustrates some of the important considerations of the team who worked to bring *Underground* to audiences and saw it as an important story that had never been told.

Twitter's role in collapsing distance between audiences and industry gives industrial agents some advantage in structuring reception. Audiences will always derive several different, and at times contradictory, meanings from a television text, and their

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[139] See Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles, "Hijacking #myNYPD: Social Media Dissent and Networked Counterpublics," *Journal of Communication* 65, no. 6, (2015).

meaning making process cannot be completely controlled by industrial agents. However, Twitter, because of its role in facilitating immediate communication between those who make a series and those who watch it, makes facilitating certain sanctioned readings easier. Further, by positioning tweets as in media res paratexts, we can further understand both textuality and the entirety of a complex series like *Underground*. To close, I return to John Legend's call to #SaveUnderground to illustrate the social and historical importance of *Underground* and its relationship with Twitter from the premiere to its end.

## CONCLUSION: Televising Black History

In August of 2017, ten days before classes for the fall semester were scheduled to commence, The University of Texas at Austin removed three confederate monuments from prominent locations on campus.[140] In his letter to the university community, which is worth quoting at length, President Gregory L. Fenves stated,

> The University of Texas at Austin is a public educational and research institution, first and foremost. The historical and cultural significance of the Confederate statues on our campus — and the connections that individuals have with them — are severely compromised by what they symbolize. Erected during the period of Jim Crow laws and segregation, the statues represent the subjugation of African Americans. That remains true today for white supremacists who use them to symbolize hatred and bigotry.
>
> The University of Texas at Austin has a duty to preserve and study history. But our duty also compels us to acknowledge that those parts of our history that run counter to the university's core values, the values of our state and the enduring values of our nation do not belong on pedestals in the heart of the Forty Acres.
>
> We do not choose our history, but we choose what we honor and celebrate on our campus. As UT students return in the coming week, I look forward to welcoming

[140] Matthew Watkins, "UT-Austin Removes Confederate Statues in the Middle of the Night," *The Texas Tribune,* August 20, 2017, https://www.texastribune.org/2017/08/20/ut-austin-removing-confederate-statues-middle-night/

them here for a new academic year with a recommitment to an open, positive and inclusive learning environment for all.[141]

I include this statement from President Fenves to illustrate how we as a nation have worked to grapple with the legacy of slavery, especially in the wake of the white supremacist march and killing of a social justice activist in Charlottesville, VA in 2017. Further, the language President Fenves uses in his statement mirrors how John Legend positioned the urgency of *Underground* when he sought to save the series after WGN America canceled all of their original programming. Legend proclaimed that in a time when the country was grappling with the politics of history and memory and reckoning with the consequences of engaging in a revisionist history of slavery and The Civil War, *Underground* was more necessary than ever. I return to Legend's campaign to save *Underground* from cancellation because I believe it brings together several different threads that make *Underground* and the viewing community that gathered around the series distinct and also highlights what propelled me to pursue this project.

*Underground* is still the only regular primetime series about slavery; the creators initially planned for five seasons of ten episodes each. Though the specific moment of "televising slavery" that *Underground* was produced and then premiered in has since passed and the series was cancelled before the narrative could be resolved, its place among the recent uptick in Black television is worthy of inquiry. In addition to going after the label of quality that has proved elusive for many Black helmed and Black-cast

[141] Gregory Fenves, "Confederate Statues on Campus," August 20, 2017, https://president.utexas.edu/messages/confederate-statues-on-campus

dramas, *Underground* sought to obtain recognition for social relevance.[142] As Brenda E. Stevenson notes in her work tracing the history of representations of slavery on-screen, *Underground* was an important addition to narrativized depictions of "the peculiar institution" because of its focus on slave resistance and its attentiveness to the positionality of Black women and children.[143] Further, *Underground* sought to set itself apart by positioning the characters as some of America's first true superheroes.

Every single Wednesday in the spring of 2016, I rushed home to be able to watch *Underground* live with a community of viewers, including the cast and creators. Together we fired off tweets reacting to the thrilling twists and turns of the first season. To accompany the tweets of "AHHHH!!!" and "OMG!!!", I and other Black viewers participated in sobering conversations about the horrific realities these individuals had to endure everyday and the immense bravery and sacrifice required to attempt escape. While reviews have rightfully highlighted the series' contemporary analogs like *Prison Break* (FOX, 2005-2009, 2017) and *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-),[144] what made *Underground* distinct and kept viewers coming back was the show's unflinching honesty and the palpable respect the creative team had for the real people whose risked their lives to escape bondage. Before starting the series, I, along with many other Black viewers,

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142 Alfred L. Martin, "Notes on Underground: WGN's Black Cast Quality TV Experiment" *The Los Angeles Review of Books,* May 31, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/notes-from-underground-wgns-black-cast-quality-tv-experiment/

143 Brenda E. Stevenson, "Filming Black Voices and Stories: Slavery on America's Screens," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 3, (2018): 488-520.

144 See Joshua Alston, "WGN America's Underground is a Taut Thriller Disguised as a History Lesson," The A.V. Club, https://tv.avclub.com/wgn-america-s-underground-is-a-taut-thriller-disguised-1798186867 and Vann R. Newkirk II, "Underground: A Thrilling Quest Story About Slavery," *The Atlantic,* May 11, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/underground-wgn-america-review/482262/

expressed disinterest in watching a series where we would witness our fictive ancestors be violently brutalized week after week. Despite my initial trepidation, I was immediately hooked in and committed to watching each episode live every week.

In beginning this project, I wanted to make this small, but vocal, community of viewers visible. I entered with a few central questions: How did Black viewers utilize second-screen viewing to discuss shows with each other? How do the practices of second-screen viewing interact with Black Twitter? How did *Underground* create and maintain a dedicated group of viewers when the channel it was on had barely any name recognition? How do industrial agents capitalize on the affordances of Twitter to facilitate a dialogic relationship with their audience? And lastly, what responses does watching slavery invite in Black Americans?

In this thesis project, I have brought together literature on the intricacies of Black audience reception with research on Black Twitter and the rise of social TV and second-screen viewing. I have illustrated that like television networks have capitalized on Twitter's affordances to encourage live television viewing in the age of narrowcasting and streaming, Black viewers have capitalized on the affordances of Twitter to enact Black subjectivities through practices like live-tweeting. As scholars like André Brock and Sarah Florini have illustrated, Black adoption of Twitter is no accident. The platform grows and changes and its affordances shift over time, and Black users have quickly and readily adapted to these changes in ways that foreground their racial identities. Through dexterous use of language (especially Twitter's compatibility with African-American Vernacular English) and Twitter's quintessential hashtag, users have continually found

new and exciting ways to represent and perform Blackness. Years after Florini and Brock had published some of the first work on race and the platform, the Black viewers of *Underground* were using emojis and GIFs to illustrate not only their reactions to the narrative, but also their relationship to Black cultural products and their experiences as Black Americans watching Black subjugation.

While connections between slavery and the material conditions of African-Americans currently are not hard to make (and in fact many scholars have done just this), the creative team behind *Underground* continually used Twitter to illustrate that this series was interested in offering a corrective on a misrepresentation of history. As scholars like Eleanor Patterson and Elizabeth Affuso have noted, the television industry has formed somewhat of a symbiotic relationship with the social media platform in order to encourage live viewing and expand audience engagement. While the creative team behind *Underground* and WGN America certainly used Twitter to promote the series and encourage live viewership, by using Jonathan Gray's formulation of in media res paratexts, I have illustrated that Twitter functions as a site for industrial agents to structure reception. In the case of *Underground,* this meant encouraging audiences to recognize craftsmanship to help locate the series, and in some senses the network as whole, as quality programming. This came in the form of highlighting the acumen of the actors, directors, and cinematographer, but also drawing attention to the research that went in to creating a dramatized, but intentional series. Through their Twitter accounts, Green, Pokaski, Smollet-Bell, Hodge, and Legend showed viewers that they understood the gravity of the stories at the center of *Underground,* and that they did everything in

their power to honor the (super)heroes at the center of the story, while also centering the ways that Black people have always exerted agency even in the harshest of circumstances. Lastly, those affiliated with the show recognized the historical antecedents to the plight of Black Americans in 2016. Premiering two years after Michael Brown was gunned down by Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO and amidst a presidential election season where the white supremacy that has always characterized the American political landscape was embodied by the Republican primary race, *Underground* capitalized on its socio-historical moment. Twitter was quickly adopted by industrial agents not just to promote the series, but to link the narrative to Black oppression across decades.

Though *Underground* is a single show and this thesis project only examines audience reception on Twitter of its inaugural season, its position in television history is distinct. When 51.1 percent of American households gathered around their television sets for eight nights in a row to watch television's adaptation of Alex Haley's *Roots,* the gripping series forced conversations across the country about one of America's "original sins." In the age of narrowcasting and more creation and distribution platforms than ever, there is no scenario in which WGN America's *Underground* even comes close to this share of American audiences. Despite the comparatively small viewership, the active engagement online tells us about how Black audience reception has adapted to media convergence, the collapse of space between audience and industry, and how viewers responded to watching the ugliest parts of America's history.

To conclude, I visit the final scene in season one's finale, where we find our heroine Rosalee (one of only two of The Macon 7 to make it to freedom) crouched over in a covered wagon, concern in her eyes as she realizes the wagon has come to a stop. When the cover hiding her from outsider's view is lifted, she brings her arm up to shield her eyes from the blistering sun. Towering above her is a woman so backlit her features are impossible to make out, but we see the rifle slung over her shoulder. Before she speaks, Black audiences already know who we are looking at. As we have followed our fictional heroes throughout their dangerous journey, the series closes by introducing the audience to a real one.

> The woman: They said you was lookin' to steal slaves.
>
> Rosalee: Can't steal somethin' that wasn't property in the first place.
>
> The woman: Well, I am to teach you how. My name's Harriet.

In her final review of the first season, Shannon M. Houston at *Paste Magazine* cites this scene to recognize womanism as the central throughline in *Underground.* She states, "Because I know I'm not alone when I say a very real chill went through my body when I saw that figure standing above Rosalee, shotgun over her shoulder. Maybe it's the same chill that Alice Walker got when she wrote the words, *womanist is to feminist what*

*purple is to lavender*" (emphasis original).[145] Houston goes on to state that while *Underground* should of course be thought of in conversation with heist thrillers and action/adventure stories, she identifies *Underground*'s sisters as films like *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), books like *Kindred* (1979), and even Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) and Rihanna's *Anti* (2016), all projects that examine Black female subjectivities and illustrate the lineage of resistance that Black women inherit.[146]

After I watched the gripping series premiere, I scoured the internet looking for a review that could possibly put into words how *Underground* made me feel. I found Houston's first review of the series at *Paste Magazine*; she immediately foregrounded her positionality and illustrated how she would watch the series not as an "objective" television critic, but as a Black woman raised by a Black woman who was a professor of African-American history. I immediately knew I had to return to *Paste* each week for her incisive commentary. Each review pushed me to consider the episodes in new ways and illustrated that I wasn't alone in thinking this series was the first of its kind. In her final review of the first season, Houston thanks the series.

> I'm a critic and I'm meant to write for all audiences, but I'm grateful that *Underground* gave me an excuse, if only once a week, to say, *not this time*. This one—these reviews, these essays—are for my sisters, my kindred. Come through, black girls. Come through and take those chills and thrills

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[145] Shannon M. Houston, "Until We All Free: Womanism and the Phenomenal *Underground* Season Finale," *Paste Magazine*, May 12, 2016, https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2016/05/until-we-all-free-womanism-and-the-phenomenal-unde.html

[146] Ibid.

> that *Underground* gave you, and make *something* of it. In other words, if you felt that this show, well, freed you in some way—don't sit comfortably in the new space you've been given. Pass the story on, and find a way to go back and free some others. Until we all free. (emphasis original)[147]

I also want to thank *Underground*, and especially Misha Green and Joe Pokaski. Their commitment to bring this narrative to American audiences took vision and conviction. Though the series ended much too soon and the tenacious viewers the series courted and that Legend had attempted to mobilize on Twitter couldn't entice another network to pick it up, *Underground* remains an important part of television history. *Underground* was able to do what television does best and illustrates why television has been able to captivate me more than any other medium since childhood. Staying with these characters and their stories for two seasons was not only riveting, but provoked a spectrum of reactions that I was able to share with a vibrant and engaged community on Twitter. As we move further into the age of "peak TV," I hope that this project helps solidify the importance of *Underground*, and also adds to the important body of scholarship on the Black audience. As the "Golden Age of Black TV" wanes and white dominated television networks and white-owned platforms like Twitter attempt to capitalize on Black viewership and then quickly abandon any sense of responsibility they might have to the community,[148] Black viewers continue to shape television discourse and exploit the

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[147] Ibid.

[148] See Dave Schilling, "Is This the Golden Age of Black TV or Another False Dawn," *The Guardian,* September 21, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/sep/21/golden-age-black-tv-false-dawn-david-simon; Angelica Jade Bastien, "Claiming the Future of Black TV," *The Atlantic,* January 29,

affordances of social media platforms to foreground their perspectives. It is those viewers that this thesis is for.

2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/01/claiming-the-future-of-black-tv/514562/; Jonathan Gray, "Merging with Diversity, or, Got MLK?," *Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture,* https://www.flowjournal.org/2006/02/merging-with-diversity-or-got-mlk-2/

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